

Paris suburb of Saint Denis under military lockdown as gun battle plays out

Stéphane Hugues
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Residents in the center of Saint Denis, a working class area in the northern suburbs of Paris, were awoken at 4:30 a.m. Wednesday by an enormous explosion and heavy gunfire. The state forces had traced suspects in the Paris terrorist attacks to an apartment of the old town and had sent in a RAID squad (a SWAT team).

As the team entered the building, the whole area was put on lockdown. Hundreds of police, Gendarmes and army soldiers patrolled the streets and set up checkpoints. When residents in the immediate area opened their doors, the security forces took aim at them with their machine guns and ordered them back inside, shouting at them to stay away from the windows. Over 15,000 people live in the immediate area of the attack.

Public transport, trains, subways and buses, and all the schools were shut down for the day and monster traffic jams formed at the roads leading into the town.

As the RAID team approached the apartment, Hasna Ait Boulahcen, a 26-year-old woman, shot at them with a machine gun and then blew herself up with a bomb belt. Boulahcen, who had been living a few miles away in Clichy-sous-bois, is the cousin of Abdelhamid Abaaoud, who the French state and media claim to be the main recruiter for ISIS in Europe and the brains behind last Friday's attacks in Paris.

Police cannot currently ascertain if Abaaoud was in the apartment. There was one man whose body, riddled with bullets and hit by grenades in the assault, was unrecognizable.

There were three other people in the apartment. The exchanges of fire, sometimes lasting over an hour, continued until about 10:30 a.m. and then became more sporadic. It is estimated that thousands of rounds were fired in all. The end of the siege was pronounced at around 11:30 a.m.

Three men were arrested and taken into custody at the end of the siege. A man who had lent his apartment to the men and a woman friend were found hiding under debris near the apartment and also arrested. Two other people from another apartment were also taken into custody. Five RAID members were slightly wounded.

Over 110 RAID squad members and BRI (Search and Intervention Brigade) members in a backup role took part in the operation. They were backed up by another 50 soldiers (part of the tens of thousands of soldiers who patrol the streets on a daily basis since the Charlie Hebdo shootings), not to mention the hundreds of police and Gendarmes keeping the centre of Saint Denis locked down.

This raid demonstrates the militarization of France since the Charlie Hebdo shootings, and now intensified under the State of Emergency declared by the government since last Saturday. Tomorrow, the National Assembly will vote to extend the State of Emergency to three months. President François Hollande has also outlined changes in the Constitution that will seriously further undermine the democratic rights of the French working class.

The justification of the Socialist Party government of Hollande in introducing these measures is the terrorism of ISIS. However it bears noting that the large majority of the young men committing these acts of terrorism were born and raised in France.

As such, they have grown up over the last 30 years under successive French governments that have imposed ever greater austerity. For that whole period, immigrant populations faced economic and social discrimination from the state and layers of the petty bourgeoisie of the type: "the position has been filled", "the apartment is already rented", etc. Thus, immigrant unemployment, especially that of the youth, is much

higher than among other social groups.

During the last 15 years or so, successive governments have attacked the working class population of Muslims, Africans and Gypsies, expelling them when they have no papers and stigmatizing Muslims with the law against the wearing of the veil in schools and public places.

Moreover, for many years these communities have been a central target of police harassment. In 2005, when police in Clichy-sous-Bois chased two boys, one Arab and one African, into a power relay station on suspicion of having stolen something and the two died of electrocution, it triggered riots throughout the Paris area and in many other parts of France. The anger of the youth over such attacks and the growing poverty in their communities has led to a growing alienation from such a hostile environment. These youth also saw the US, Britain and more recently France invading Iraq, Libya and now Syria and destroying their economies.

ISIS was thus able to indoctrinate some of these alienated youth, often out of work and on the periphery of French society. When some of them started to make the trip to Syria, to join Islamist militias in the Western-backed war for regime change, the French secret services let them go, merely interviewing them when they returned.

Now Hollande calls for national unity against ISIS and imposes a State of Emergency undermining democratic rights. But it has been his government and preceding ones, such as former president Nicolas Sarkozy's, that have fuelled ISIS, a totally reactionary organization, through their austerity measures coupled with discrimination and police harassment and their financing and arming of ISIS and similar proxy forces in their imperialist wars.

The only response that Hollande, the Socialist Party and the entire French ruling elite have is to continue to wage imperialist war for their class interests and stifle the growing anger in the working class at home through building an authoritarian state.



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