

# French police attack demonstrators protesting anti-worker labor law reform

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French riot police on Saturday savagely assaulted demonstrators protesting against the Socialist Party (PS) government's austerity policies and the labor law reform of Labor Minister Myriam El Khomri. The decision of the trade union bureaucracy and its political allies in the periphery of the PS to not call workers out on strike alongside protesting high school and university students left the PS free to assault and arrest demonstrators in cities across France.

In Paris, groups of protesters marching from Republic Square to Nation Square via Bastille Square were surrounded by increasing numbers of riot police as they proceeded along the route. The atmosphere on the march was tense, with lawyers from the French Lawyers' Union (SAF) handing out leaflets advising demonstrators on how to react if arrested.

Slogans on the marches included, "There is plenty of money, it's in accounts in Panama," referring to the Panama Papers revelations of financial fraud by international financial elites; and "P for putrid, S for swine, down with the PS."

A police helicopter flew above the Paris march and clashes broke out as demonstrators reached Nation Square. Security forces blocked strikers marching behind banners of the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT) from entering the square while they fired volleys of tear gas and charged students who had already arrived there. Plainclothes police tried to snatch and arrest protesters, who fought the police detachments.

There were at least nine arrests in Paris and 26 across France, and several protesters in Paris were injured, including one woman who was hit in the eye.

In Rennes, where several thousand protesters marched, riot police charged the marchers and fired large quantities of tear gas and stun grenades. Demonstrators set up flaming barricades in areas near the Lices neighborhood, where street fighting occurred. There were reports of firemen coming under fire from birdshot until police charges cleared the area. According to the news program *20 Minutes*, 18 people were injured in Rennes, including five with critical wounds

such as skull fractures and eye injuries resulting from police baton attacks.

Tens of thousands of people marched in Marseille near the Old Port and in Toulouse, where student protesters joined a demonstration of actors at the Toulouse National Theater (TNT) before occupying Capitole Square.

In all, several hundreds of thousands of people marched in some 200 cities across France against the El Khomri Law and the broader austerity agenda of the European Union, defying the state of emergency imposed by the PS after the November 13 terror attacks in Paris.

The mobilization was notably smaller than the March 31 protest. It followed an earlier protest last Tuesday that was violently attacked by police.

The central political issue facing the protest movement is the absence of a clear perspective for opposing the PS government. Despite broad opposition to Socialist Party President François Hollande, France's most unpopular president since World War II, and widespread support among young people and workers for militant action to oppose him, the youth are being isolated in protests in which they are attacked by hordes of highly-armed riot police.

This is bound up with the fact that the trade union organizations and their pseudo left allies among the political parties in France all called for a vote for Hollande in the 2012 presidential election, and all of them are seeking to block a movement that might bring him down.

At the same time, political forces in the periphery of the PS, including Jean-Luc Mélenchon's Left Front, various Green officials and members of the New Anti-capitalist Party, are seeking to promote symbolic #NightOnOurFeet protests. These actions involve the occupation of public squares and are modeled on the movements in Athens and Madrid in 2011 that helped bring the Syriza government to power in Greece and establish the Podemos party in Spain. They offer no way forward for workers and seek to divert youth from the task of mobilizing the working class in struggle against the PS and its allies.

The #NightOnOurFeet movement is a means of averting a

broader mobilization of workers by staging actions that exclude the mobilization of the working class' industrial strength. It also provides an avenue for various political operatives and reactionary forces to gain influence over the broader movement in opposition to the PS and its labor "reform."

At the Paris demonstration on Saturday, a *World Socialist Web Site* reporter spoke to a hotel worker who said there was widespread anger at his workplace over the law, which, he added, was being widely discussed. Nevertheless, he was the only worker from his hotel who turned out to show solidarity with the youth. A few steps away, a political operative who previously had been a member of Mélenchon's staff told the WSWS of his enthusiasm for the #NightOnOurFeet protests and boasted that he had been at planning meetings where he had seen the prime minister.

Dalil, a high school student at the Paris demonstration who was protesting the law together with several friends, spoke to the WSWS. He said of the labor law, "For high school students, for future generations, it will mean that we have even less job security. It is one of the worst things that could happen to us, actually. We already live in a world in crisis. It is already complicated. There is already enormous unemployment among youth and there is no point making things worse. But this law will make things worse."

Dalil also said he opposed the police forces in France and was against the proxy war being waged in Syria by the French government and its NATO allies, including military strikes ostensibly carried out in retaliation for terror attacks in France and Belgium.

The war in Syria, Dalil said, "keeps the kettle boiling in areas of conflict, that is, conflicts that have been stoked by the Western powers, and today it has totally exploded in the region. In fact, we keep having aggressive policies that no longer work. And we know they don't work because long-distance bombings kill civilians, and I don't see why we would reply to attacks that claimed 130 lives here by killing 2,000 people over there. It has no meaning."

The WSWS also spoke to Jérémie, an intermittently employed actor, who bitterly attacked the El Khomri law. "What a big mess! It's just more power to big business... So we'll always be more in a hurry, with less time for each other and more money for the bosses, who manifestly have enough to put plenty of it away in Panama," he said.

"You start realizing that it's a type of oligarchy that is emerging," he added. "In all the countries it's the same."

He expressed deep disillusionment with the PS. "I don't even know what the PS means anymore," he said. "Because with the PS' policy agenda, I have the impression that the guy [President Hollande] took power under a certain label and then told himself, 'No, in fact the PS is a good tool, but

me, the policies I want to carry out are rather right-wing and free-market.' We are far away from when he said, 'If I'm elected President I will never...' and, 'I would never do this if elected.'"

Dalil added that the rise of the neo-fascist National Front "goes in parallel with the impoverishment of the population." He continued, "I'd say that each time people have problems to house each other and get food, there is always a fascist who comes along and says, 'Well, the person responsible for this is that person.' It pisses people off, but I think if we don't get better policies, [the rise of the FN] is a real prospect and it will not make anything better."

The WSWS also spoke to two high school students, Marin and Lucas, who were attending the Paris protest and discussed the problems they have seen in the protests.

"There is too much violence, there was a lot of rough stuff, and it's a problem," they said. "There are too many tensions.... we try to get involved in the movement anyway, but the problem is that since we are young, we are not so fond of the riot police. Otherwise, it is a movement that is fun because it gathers many people. I have met many people, including meeting people across generations. I met people of all ages."

Marin added, "The world took a direction many years ago that had consequences that were not foreseen at the time. There will be a day when it will go too far, and we will look around and say that we should have gone back in time much earlier and changed a lot of things earlier. It comes from war, from a lot of inequality, and sometimes a sense that there is a lot of injustice too."



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