

Protests spread against sexual assault by French police at Aulnay-sous-Bois

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Protests against police violence have spread across France, three weeks after the sexual assault of Théo, a 22-year-old youth, by police in Aulnay-sous-Bois, a working class suburb of Paris. Théo was hospitalised with a 10-cm wound to his rectum inflicted by a police baton.

After a call for protests spread on social media, students at a dozen high schools in Paris blockaded their schools Thursday morning, as the hashtag “Blockade for Théo” spread on Twitter. Groups of high school students met in the morning to stack trash bins and security barricades around the doors of their schools, to block their teachers and fellow students from entering.

An unauthorised protest on Place de la Nation Square in Paris at the end of the morning attracted some 800 to 1,000 people. Police launched a massive operation to repress the protest. According to the police prefecture, 40 arrests were made, leading to 39 detentions. In Montpellier, a similar protest took place; police reacted by blocking roads. Another demonstration also took place in Toulouse.

In Rouen, some 200 youth protesters met around bus stops at the Arts Theater, near the Seine River, according to the prefecture. Security forces, including mobile *gendarmes* and riot police, blocked access to commercial zones where there are several banks. Even before the protest march started off, police carried out “some arrests,” though the prefecture did not immediately give a concrete number.

Since early February, young people have routinely turned out to protest the sexual assault of Théo. They provoked minor clashes with police and also fires in the working class neighborhoods of Aulnay, a few days after the barbaric assault committed by police. The next day, several protests took place across the northern

suburbs of Paris, in front of the courthouse in Bobigny, as well as in Argenteuil, Drancy, and Noisy-le-Sec.

On the weekend of February 18-19, several protests took place including in Paris, Dijon, Rennes, Poitiers, and Nice, based on calls from organisations close to the ruling Socialist Party (PS). These include SOS-Racism, the Human Rights League, the Movement against Racism and for Friendship between Peoples (MRAP), the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) union, and the Unitary Trade Union Federation (FSU).

In Paris, some 2,300 people gathered on Republic Square according to police statistics, 4,000 to 5,000 according to the protest organisers. Chants on the march included, “We don’t forget, we don’t forgive!”, “Police everywhere, justice nowhere,” “Impunity and injustice, let’s disarm police!”

This movement against police brutality is politically explosive, as it takes place under the anti-democratic state of emergency imposed by the PS government, and during the campaign for the April-May 2017 presidential elections.

The PS government imposed the state of emergency after the November 13, 2015, terror attacks in Paris by Islamist networks used by the NATO powers in their war for regime-change in Syria.

The PS then turned the state of emergency on French workers and youth, during the protests against the anti-worker labour law last year. After crushing protests by high school students in March-April with brutal police violence, the PS sent police against workers striking against the law, including in the ports, steel-working, aerospace, and transport industries.

Finally, after then-Prime Minister Manuel Valls threatened to ban protests outright, the trade unions halted protests against the overwhelmingly unpopular labour law.

The current protests underscore that the social opposition revealed by last year's labour law struggle is still explosive, even though it was strangled by the surrender to Valls by the union bureaucracy and their political allies, including the New Anti-capitalist Party.

The protests in France are part of a broader movement of opposition to extreme-right policies carried out by governments internationally, such as protests in the United States and around the world against the policies of US President Donald Trump.

The deep discrediting of the PS government, the rising anger of working class suburbs and the rise of a student protest movement terrify the ruling class in France.

Political and trade union officials reacted by dismissing the significance of the police assault, which PS Interior Minister Bruno Le Roux initially called an "accident," and demanding stepped-up repression.

François Fillon, presidential candidate for the right-wing The Republicans (LR), accused the PS of letting "violent protests" disturb the election campaign. "Only two months from the presidential election," he wrote in a communiqué, "we are living in a situation of quasi-civil war."

Prime Minister Bernard Cazeneuve replied, "I can understand that some candidates may be tempted to use polemics to cover up their difficulties in the campaign. ... [But] using the term of quasi-civil war, as a leading political official who is well aware of the level of mobilisation of the security forces in our country, is simply irresponsible."

Officials of the neo-fascist National Front (FN) demanded that protests against the police assault on Théo be banned outright—indicating the policies that the FN will try to pursue, should it win the upcoming presidential elections. In a communiqué published Sunday, FN presidential candidate Marine Le Pen said, "I demand that the relevant authorities ban these high-risk protests."

Jean-Claude Delage, the general secretary of the Alliance-National Police trade union, which is close to the FN, said that "allowing these demonstrations to proceed in the context of tensions in the suburbs and a state of emergency is not reasonable."

The high school students' protests to support Théo, defying the state of emergency, underscore the growing movement to the left among workers and youth, and

growing opposition to the state of emergency and the PS's other reactionary policies.

Explosive social tensions are building beneath the surface of official political life during the election campaign, and that will inevitably erupt after the elections, if not before. All the major presidential candidates are supporting higher spending on and force levels for the police, which have been dramatically expanded by the state of emergency, police state measures overwhelmingly rejected by youth and the workers.



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