

French police fire tear gas at protesters amid clampdown over Orly airport shooting

Our reporters
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Yesterday in downtown Paris, French police attacked a demonstration of approximately 7,000 people against police brutality, firing tear gas and clashing with protesters, while blocking other groups of peaceful demonstrators with contempt for basic democratic rights. The march defied the perpetually-extended state of emergency in France which, according to the statements of Socialist Party (PS) government officials as well as members of the right-wing and neo-fascist parties, signifies that no protest should take place.

The protest was organized by the March for Justice and Dignity, an organization set up by the families of victims of police violence in multiple Paris suburbs. A key case is the recent police rape of Théo, a youth from the working class suburb of Aulnay-sous-Bois who suffered a 10-cm wound to his rectum from a police baton last month.

The assault on the protest came amid the security hysteria whipped up by the PS government and right-wing presidential candidate François Fillon over Saturday's Orly airport shooting. A lone deranged gunman, 39-year-old Frenchman Ziyed Ben Belgacem, wounded one policeman during a shooting rampage and was then shot and killed by soldiers patrolling the airport after seizing a female soldier's weapon. The entire airport was subsequently put on lock-down.

These events point to the explosive social tensions in France in the run-up to the April-May presidential elections, and the relentlessly right-wing, law-and-order atmosphere whipped up by all factions of France's political establishment.

Several relatives of victims of police violence spoke out during the protest, giving voice to the deep anger building in working class areas at acts of police brutality committed with total impunity. Amal Bentousi, whose brother Amine was shot in the back

and killed in 2012 while fleeing police, said, "My brother's murderer was convicted but still for many families, this is not the case."

Ramata Dieng, whose brother Dieng died of asphyxiation during a 2007 arrest where police harshly restrained him and held him against the floor, said: "We demand that police not be above the law. We demand that their homicides be judged based on what is written in the penal code." Referring to investigators' conclusions that there was no reason to charge police in the case, she added, "We have had enough of these mockeries of justice."

At the tail end of the protest, however, as the march approached Republic Square, clashes erupted between police and unidentified groups of hooded protesters or "Black Bloc" protesters. The activity of such forces, which have repeatedly been shown in previous protests in France and across Europe to be infiltrated by police provocateurs, again served as a pretext for a police crackdown, including against peaceful protesters.

Protesters from the petty-bourgeois New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) were reportedly blocked from continuing on their way during the protest march, although there was no indication of any police complaint against them. Particularly given the well-known and very close ties between the NPA and the ruling Socialist Party (PS), the fact that police squads under PS authority would target NPA militants is a warning. They are prepared to proceed brutally against other organizations that are not as slavishly loyal to the long-term interests of the PS.

The protests give a far better picture of the population's attitudes towards French police than the unrelenting worship of the police and the interior ministry in the media, and polls that purport to show that a broad majority of the population supports the

state of emergency. Amid a deep social and economic crisis in France and across Europe, police interventions in increasingly exploited and oppressed working class neighborhoods produce explosive anger.

The only response of the deeply unpopular PS government has been to try to suppress social opposition by fomenting a hysterical, law-and-order atmosphere and constantly playing up the role of police under the state of emergency.

On Saturday, as all of Orly airport was put on lockdown, stranding thousands of passengers, President François Hollande and François Fillon, the presidential candidate of the right-wing The Republicans (LR) party, made bellicose statements about the shooting. Fillon used the incident to denounce any suggestion that the state of emergency, which suspends basic democratic rights, could be terminated. “Nothing, I repeat, nothing authorizes us to lift the state of emergency,” Fillon said, adding that “faced with terrible stakes, carelessness is no longer appropriate.”

Hollande declared, “Those who were asking themselves about the appropriateness of Operation Sentinel [the deployment of armed soldiers across public spaces, airports, and train stations across France] must now understand that this reinforcement is critical, that the entire mechanism responded perfectly to orders given several months ago by me and by the government.”

In fact, the initial reports that are emerging suggest that the presence of soldiers armed with assault rifles in public places across France rather encouraged Belgacem to act aggressively—seeking out a confrontation with soldiers in order to end his own life.

Around 6:55 a.m. on Saturday, he shot and wounded a policeman with a pocket shotgun during a traffic stop at Garges-lès-Gonesse, north of Paris, and then fled. He then called his family and said, “I’ve done something stupid, I shot at people and they shot back.” He then went to a bar in Vitry-sur-Seine, where he threatened the patrons and fired several shots without hitting anyone. He then stole a car and drove to Orly airport.

At 8:22 a.m., he confronted a three-person Operation Sentinel patrol at the airport, shouting: “Drop your weapons! Hands on your head! I am here to die by Allah. In any case, there will be deaths.” He tried and ultimately succeeded in grabbing the female soldier’s assault rifle, at which point the two other soldiers shot

and killed him.

Belgacem’s family said that he had no known Islamist ties, and that his shooting rampage was due to a history of armed robbery and drug addiction. “My son was never a terrorist. He never prayed, and he drank. And under the effect of alcohol and cannabis, this is where you end up,” Belgacem’s father said while under preventive arrest for interrogation by police.



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