

Youth clashes with police in Paris suburbs point to explosive social tensions

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Clashes that erupted during an ID check last Thursday between police and youth at the Cité des 3000 urban estate in Aulnay-sous-Bois, northeast of Paris, point to enormous tensions in working class areas after two years of the French state of emergency and deepening social crisis. It was in this same neighborhood that, in February, the barbaric sexual assault by police of a 22-year-old named Théo provoked indignation across France.

During the ID check, provoked by suspicions by members of the Anti-Criminal Brigade (BAC) that “dealers” were being alerted of their presence, a youth refused to give his papers and then, with the aid of other residents, was able to flee. Policemen who tried to stop him were confronted by a large number of youth. Another group of several dozen people surrounded their car, which was guarded by a policewoman, whom they attacked. According to police, two weapons were stolen from the car: a gun firing rubber bullets and a taser-type revolver. A man reportedly fired rubber bullets at the police car with the gun, which was found on Sunday.

The press widely reported these incidents, exclusively citing police accounts. The courts rapidly swung into action: the local prosecutor’s office in Bobigny opened investigations for “assault and armed assault against individuals holding public authority,” as well as “coordinated theft and assault and degradation of public property.”

Since last Thursday, three youths aged 18 or 19 were arrested, and two are still in detention. One has been charged with “assault against individuals holding public authority” and released. Another is reportedly “implicated in the initial acts of violence against the two policemen.” The last person arrested, on Monday, is reportedly the youth who refused to give his papers.

In the same location, during a similar ID check six

months ago, police had sexually assaulted a Théo, a resident of the same estate, causing a 10cm injury to the rectum that required an emergency operation. A few days later, hundreds of people marched in the neighborhood to demand “justice for Théo.” Inhabitants of the area criticized in the press daily harassment of youth in that estate by the police forces.

Numerous protests took place across France in the weeks after police sexually assaulted Théo, on slogans such as “Don’t forgive, don’t forget,” “Rapist cops in jail,” or “It’s impunity and injustice, so disarm the police.” The official investigation into the sexual assault of Théo is still underway, and social tensions in Aulnay are explosive.

At the time of the first protest against the assault of Théo, Abdallah Benjana, a former assistant of the Aulnay mayor, commented: “I have the impression that the population feels humiliated. All the youth in that neighborhood want is peace and quiet. What is the point of what was done? To spark something? Isn’t there enough dry powder in these neighborhoods? There is unemployment, insecurity, high rents, no perspective for the future. If you do that to a youth, the only thing you will get is an explosion.”

Aulnay-sous-Bois exemplifies the social attacks that working class suburbs have suffered under a succession of governments, of the Socialist Party (PS) as of the right, over the last 30 years. The Cité des 3000 was originally built to house workers at the Citroën (PSA) plant at Aulnay. The urban estates in the north of the city housed 24,000 people, or a third of the city’s population, concentrated on only four percent of its territory.

The closure of PSA-Aulnay in 2013 devastated the area. It could take place only because the General Confederation of Labor (CGT) isolated PSA-Aulnay

workers in order to prevent a broader automobile strike that would have threatened the PS government of President François Hollande. The unemployment rate at Aulnay is 16.7 percent (30 percent for workers aged 19 to 30). Three years after the closure of PSA-Aulnay, many laid off workers still have no work and are running out of unemployment benefits, at €480 per month.

Newly elected President Emmanuel Macron's plan for working-class suburbs, aiming to “favor entrepreneurs,” only demonstrates his hostility to inhabitants of these suburbs.

In the legislative district including Aulnay-sous-Bois, abstention in the run-off of the legislative election reached 67.5 percent. Since 3.4 percent of voters went to the voting booths to cast blank or spoiled ballots, only 29 percent of registered voters in the area actually cast a vote in the elections. In 2012, 63 percent of voters in this district had voted for the PS and Hollande in the second round of the presidential elections.

Social inequality is exploding in Europe as around the world, and inhabitants of large impoverished estates are ever more hostile to their situation, which is correctly seen as a war of the rich against the poor. As the reaction of the London population to the social murder of the Grenfell inferno shows, those responsible for the disaster—whose victims the authorities have until now refused to count precisely—are clearly seen as the super-rich and their state agencies.

There is rising opposition to police brutality internationally. Workers, whether they live in Chicago, London, or Paris, increasingly see harassment, intimidation, and police brutality more and more as measures of class repression aimed at the population.

As the recent Aulnay incident shows, attempts at resistance to police harassment rapidly turn under these conditions into a political confrontation between the population and the state.



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