French riot police launch mass expulsions of refugees from Paris

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Last Wednesday, in the early morning hours, hundreds of French riot police assaulted and tore down one of the biggest refugee camps in France, at the Saint Denis Canal in the 19th district of Paris.

Over 1,700 refugees, who came largely from Somalia, Sudan and Eritrea, had been living rough for months in squalid conditions in the camp. Most of the refugees in this camp had escaped from their war-torn countries and made the dangerous crossing of the Mediterranean Sea from Libya, where they had to evade continuing fighting as well as mass refugee prison camps set up after the 2011 NATO war in that country.

The CRS (Republican Security Companies) riot police forcibly expelled refugees including women, unaccompanied minors and children and escorted them to 20 temporary detention centers across the Paris area. Refugees were only allowed to bring their belongings in shopping bags or small suitcases. Several hundred refugees fled and escaped before the riot police entered into the camp.

After the initial police assault, bulldozers destroyed hundreds of tiny, two-person sleeping tents that volunteers had supplied to the refugees. When the police bulldozers demolished the camp, riot police patrolled the Saint Denis Canal and guarded the entire surrounding area, in order to suppress any resistance that emerged. It was the 35th time since mid-2015 that police forcefully removed refugees from makeshift camps in Paris; some 28,000 refugees have been expelled this way.

Refugees are reportedly to be detained in temporary prison centers while police check their documents and administrative situation. After a brief examination, refugees face the risk of deportation from France due to President Emmanuel Macron’s draconian new asylum law, passed in April to slash the number of asylum applications and create conditions for mass summary expulsion proceedings.

According to certain press reports, last Thursday 2,132 migrants were deported from Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris.

Last November, Interior Minister Gerard Collomb ordered the police prefects of France’s 96 mainland departments to deport failed asylum seekers and undocumented immigrants. The circular, which was leaked to the press, demanded prefects provide explicit “details about the fight against irregular immigration in your department in 2017, and your plan for the implementation of these instructions in the coming months. The fight against irregular immigration is the responsibility of the prefect in each department. It is necessary to act quickly.”

The Macron government, backed by the entire European Union (EU), is escalating its assault on refugees and their democratic rights, setting up and deploying a massive police corps that can also be turned against workers and students protesting wars and social conditions in France today.

These also expose those who argued, in line with the European Union (EU) bureaucracy, that workers had to vote for Macron as a lesser evil compared to neo-fascist candidate Marine Le Pen in order to help refugees. The Socialist Equality Party of France alone rejected these arguments, to which pseudo-left forces like Unsubmissive France or the New Anti-capitalist Party adapted themselves, and called for an active boycott of the run-off of the 2017 elections. This argument has been tragically vindicated, time and again, by Macron’s rising attacks on refugees.

Today, Macron is largely taking over the anti-refugee agenda as formulated by Le Pen’s National Front (FN)

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Collomb has demanded that French regional authorities build “mobile teams” to evict refugees and undocumented immigrants from makeshift camps. Last January, he announced plans to establish 400 detention centers, where “economic migrants” could be jailed and deported.

WSWS reporters who visited the Saint Denis Canal and Saint Martin Canal refugee camps last month found that most of the refugees in these camps had fled to France to escape imperialist wars and state repression. There are now 60 million refugees around the world, the greatest number since the end of World War II. That is the result of decades of US-led NATO wars of plunder in Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Iraq, Somalia and beyond that have devastated entire societies and claimed millions of lives.

In one interview with the WSWS at the Saint Martin Canal, a young Afghan man from the Jalalabad area explained how he fled his country after US troops arrived in his village while he was away visiting relatives, and massacred his entire family—his father, mother, two brothers and a sister.

Then there are the horrific conditions refugees suffer while on the way to France. Doctors Without Borders head of mission in France, Corinne Torre, told the media, “The major issue was refugees’ and migrants’ mental health after trauma. Most of these people have come through Libya. Many have faced violence, torture, inhumane treatment, traffickers or sexual violence. We don’t talk enough about that, and there should be better structures in place to deal with it.”

Nonetheless, refugees in camps in France must not only endure the squalid and humiliating conditions in these makeshift camps, but also battle with the authorities to establish their refugee status. This is a virtually impossible task for masses of immigrants, who do not have the money or the official papers to submit to French immigration authorities. In order to hire legal staff to translate documents into French and argue before the state authorities, refugees typically need more than €2,000.

Macron government officials are well aware that the vast majority of refugees cannot pay such a sum, and that they are now at the mercy of police, who can easily reject their applications and deport them back to their war-torn countries.

At the same time, French police are handing out fines to non-profit organizations trying to help refugees and supply them with clothing and food, as part of a ruthless strategy to prevent anyone from helping refugees in Paris.

Every indication is that Macron is preparing even more repression against immigrants in Paris and across France. There are reports that, in the coming days, police will destroy the refugee camps at both the Saint Martin Canal and at the Porte de la Chapelle areas, where thousands of desperate refugees are staying.

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