

Riots erupt in Nantes in western France after police murder

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Riots broke out in several suburbs of Nantes, 385 kilometres west of Paris, on the night of Sunday to Monday after paramilitary police shot and killed a 22-year-old man. Multiple witnesses to the killing, including journalists, asserted that police shot the victim in cold blood at point-blank range in his car, even though he posed no threat to them.

Facebook, however, is censoring videos that witnesses to the police murder are trying to post online, and the French government is brazenly advancing a totally different account of events.

The Departmental Directorate of Public Security claims that, since the youth's identity was "unclear, police received the order to bring back the driver" to the police commissariat, then shot him after he put his car in reverse and grazed a policeman with his car. The victim has been identified as a resident of the Paris area, in the Val d'Oise. He was apparently visiting family in Nantes, the sixth largest city in France.

Multiple eyewitnesses have directly rejected the police account. According to Kamel, a witness who lives in the Le Breil neighborhood where the youth was shot, the dead man "only wanted to escape the police search, and police fired without any reason. There was no threat. He just went into reverse, but there were no cops behind his car. I was there and I saw it. There was even someone who filmed the entire scene and put it on Facebook, but then they took down the video."

Reporters for Europe1 radio found Ahmed, who had filmed the killing, and were able to watch his video. It reportedly confirms the eyewitnesses' account and gives the lie to the official version. Ahmed said the cops "were arresting the youth, they wanted to bring him with them. And he went backwards, that's it! At the same time, they shot him in his throat."

Ahmed said the youth could have been saved if the

cops had not waited to call an ambulance and added, "They are professionals, they could have used a Taser on the young man. They use a Taser, or shoot the tires, they should do everything to avoid killing him! It is police brutality, they are responsible! They are supposed to protect us, but they kill our children."

In Nantes, independent journalist Marion Lopez posted a video on Twitter interviewing a witness who confirms this account and gives a chilling account of an execution-style police killing: "He was just trying to go into reverse. They got him up against a wall. ... [The young man] was already immobile, he could not do anything else. The policeman came up to him, and shot him at point-blank range."

The witness confirmed that the victim had not hit any police officers and pointed to the police's refusal to call for medical help: "The police did not even try to help him or to give him first aid. A policewoman put her hands on him to help him, that was all. Then the police told us, 'Call the ambulance so we can treat him,' but that is not our responsibility to do that. The firemen finally came after 10-15 minutes. Police told us he was not dead but I saw, I tried to revive him. I tried everything I knew but the life drained out of him in front of me."

Shortly after the victim died, riots and clashes with security forces broke out in several neighborhoods in Nantes—Le Breil, Malakoff and Les Dervallières. Hundreds of policemen were deployed to put large areas under lockdown and fired grenades and tear gas at protesters.

Les Dervallières was still under police lockdown on Wednesday. Residents reported a local courthouse and judicial center on fire, as well as municipal offices, a medical center, a library located in the same building complex and several shops.

After Nantes mayor Johanna Roland called for calm at 2 a.m., Interior Minister Gérard Collomb defended the security forces and condemned the rioters “with the greatest firmness.” He threatened to continue indefinitely with the police lockdown in the city: “All necessary means are currently mobilized and will be so as long as is necessary, in order to calm the situation down and prevent any new incidents.”

This is an unambiguous signal that French President Emmanuel Macron backs the action of the police, and that the official investigation of the murder will seek to whitewash it by suppressing or discrediting the eyewitness accounts of the shooting.

This brutal police murder of a man in front of multiple witnesses marks a new stage in the emergence of a police-state in France and across Europe. Berlin and Paris are rapidly aligning themselves with the demands of far-right governments in Italy and Austria to shut the borders and carry out draconian attacks on refugees’ basic democratic rights. At the same time, Collomb and Macron are giving police a license to kill in working class and immigrant neighborhoods.

A broad escalation of state terror aimed at the population is underway amid growing opposition to austerity in the working class. The European Union is threatening to intern hundreds of thousands in a vast network of concentration camps in Libya and also Greece or Italy, which could expand to include Albania and Tunisia.

Testimony by journalists and Nantes’ residents that Facebook is blocking videos exposing the police murder raises serious political questions.

As the WSWs has noted, the goal of Internet censorship targeting social media is to stifle social discontent and protests. Last year, in the US Congress, several politicians demanded that Google and Facebook step up censorship because, according to Representative Adam Schiff, alleged enemies are using the Internet to try to “mobilize real Americans to sign online petitions and join rallies and protests.” Schiff went on to warn against “widening divisions among our society.”

This raises the question: is the removal of videos of the Nantes shooting from Facebook being demanded by top government officials to try to calm the situation by blocking the free flow of information and thus an objective investigation of the police murder?

Above all, this killing is the result of the longstanding deliberate encouragement and promotion of a policy of extrajudicial murder at the top level of the French state. In 2016, the president at the time, François Hollande, boasted he had given orders to assassinate French citizens based on allegations by intelligence or police agencies they might be preparing terror attacks.

These so-called “*Opérations Homo*,” for “Homicide,” were given generally complacent coverage in the media, even though they flagrantly violate the outlawing of the death penalty inscribed in the French constitution.

Rules allowing police to more broadly and easily use their firearms, implemented under the state of emergency in the name of stopping terror attacks, have also encouraged a rapid rise in police violence. After rules were adopted in February 2017 allowing police to fire on drivers of vehicles who they thought might threaten the lives or well-being of others, French police have used their firearms 394 times last year. This was a 54 percent increase over the previous year, according to a report of the General Inspection of the National Police (IGPN).

Only an independent and impartial investigation could legitimately determine criminal and political responsibility in the police murder committed Sunday night in Nantes.



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