

Top French presidential aide held for illegally assaulting peaceful protesters

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Alexandre Benalla, a close aide of President Emmanuel Macron and his deputy chief of staff, has been detained for questioning by police after it emerged that he illegally donned a CRS riot police helmet and its insignia, and then assaulted two peaceful protesters on May Day. For several months the Elysée presidential palace covered up this brutal and illegal attack on protesters exercising their democratic rights.

The scandal involving the man charged with security for Macron's presidential campaign erupted on Wednesday evening, when *Le Monde* posted an article reporting: "Alexandre Benalla, a close adviser of the President ... wearing a helmet of the police forces though he is not a policeman, attacked a youth lying on the ground during a demonstration taking place on the Place de la Contrescarpe in Paris. The helmeted man loses control, drags the youth on the ground, violently grabs him by the neck then strikes him several times."

In a video published by *Le Monde*, a group of CRS first drags the youth along the ground. Benalla, wearing a CRS helmet and armband, then returns and again forces the youth to the ground, grabs his neck and strikes him repeatedly on the head and body. Benalla then assaults a young woman, who cries out, "Stop already! You are sick!"

Benalla has confirmed that he is indeed the man appearing in the video.

This affair is a devastating exposure of the brutality and lawlessness of the top personnel of the French state and police. As Macron imposes tens of billions of euros in social cuts rejected by a large majority of the French people to finance a major increase in military spending, the Elysée staff is seized by violent hysteria aimed at those who reject its reactionary policies.

The unholy alliance of the French presidency and the CRS riot police, a force that emerged from the pro-Nazi

Vichy regime's paramilitary units (GMR), exposes the breakdown of French democracy. Macron, who began his presidency by addressing a "Republican salute" to his defeated opponent, neo-fascist Marine Le Pen, runs an administration linked at the highest level to despised police agencies that are one of the main social bases of French neo-fascism.

The Paris prosecutor's office launched an investigation only on July 19, because the Elysée did not hand the matter over to the courts as required by Article 40 of the Penal Code.

Macron's chief of staff, Patrick Strzoda, confirmed to *Le Monde* that Benalla had indeed carried out the assault on May 1. According to Elysée spokesman Bruno Roger-Petit, Benalla had asked for authorization, "while taking a vacation day," to "observe police operations." Strzoda reportedly granted him permission and insisted that he had to function as an observer. Benalla was accompanied during the assault by Vincent Crase, a reserve policeman employed by Macron's political party, "who has also been subject to disciplinary action."

Benalla's violent assault on the small group of peaceful protesters, apparently as a way to relax on a day off, was totally arbitrary. The demonstration's Facebook page announced that it would be "a political picnic" and a "moment of good cheer." *Les Inrocks* [French cultural magazine] comments, speaking of Benalla, that "It is clearly not the appeals for him to stop, but rather the realization that he is being filmed, that forces him to stop his actions."

The Elysée tried to cover up the affair, and Benalla was only put on administrative leave for two weeks. Roger-Petit claimed that this was "the most serious sanction ever imposed on a mission chief" at the Elysée. Benalla continued to oversee security

operations, however, including for players on France's World Cup team when they returned to celebrate their victory on the Champs-Élysées avenue in Paris.

However, Justice Minister Nicole Belloubet went against the decision of the Elysée staff and called for an investigation, while asserting that Benalla went to the protest without authorization.

Benalla's assault against the protesters took place in the context of enormous class tensions, which no doubt played a major role in the Elysée's decision to pass over in silence an affair that directly implicated it.

Around the time of May Day, a strike wave launched by substantial sections of the working class against Macron's austerity policies was reaching its peak. Rail workers had been on strike since March and were demonstrating their overwhelming opposition to Macron's bill privatizing the French National Railways (SNCF) and slashing pay scales. Air France workers had stunned the trade unions and management by voting to reject a concessions contract.

Electrical workers were also taking strike action, blockading power generation sites, and students were blockading universities to protest reactionary selective admissions procedures.

Amid growing social anger, the state increasingly reacts via police terror to all forms of opposition. In 2016, President François Hollande deployed a massive police presence under the state of emergency to violently repress high school and university students protesting his reactionary labour law. The uninterrupted growth of police violence in France, underscored by the recent police murder in Nantes, also takes the form of the hysterical anger of Macron's top advisors.

The attempts by the rest of the French political establishment to distance itself from Benalla's actions reek of hypocrisy. Socialist Party (PS) Senator Rachid Temal attacked Benalla on Twitter, writing: "In the face of these two errors and this undeniable and unacceptable assault, Benalla must resign." Générations, the political organization founded by PS presidential candidate Benoît Hamon, also posted a statement on Twitter denouncing "impunity at the top."

In fact, Benalla is a product of the PS machine from which Macron himself emerged. He had previously worked in the security detail of top PS official and Lille mayor Martine Aubry, and of Hollande. He also worked for a week as the driver of PS presidential

candidate Arnaud Montebourg.

Macron has refused to make any comment on the scandal involving his presidency. While meeting with Post Office management to lay out and promote his planned "reform," he brushed away questions about the Benalla affair, saying: "I am here, busy with people."



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