

French riot police attack protests against deadly Marseille building collapse

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Ten days after eight people died in the collapse of three dilapidated buildings on the Rue d'Aubagne, located in an impoverished district of Marseille, 8,000 joined a demonstration Wednesday directed at the city council. Government representatives responded by dispatching riot police to attack the protesters.

The clashes are a sign of the explosive social anger that has been elevated to the surface by the building collapse—a social crime against the working class. The eight victims are dead because they had could not afford to rent homes in more affluent neighborhoods, while the government of Emmanuel Macron hands out tens of billions of euros in tax cuts to the rich. They are dead due to the austerity policies carried out over decades across Europe.

The protest began late Wednesday afternoon at the Rue d'Aubagne. From there the marchers moved past the Old Port of Marseille to the Town Hall. Protesters carried pictures of the victims, five men and three women, one the mother of a young boy who is now orphaned. Referring to Mayor of Marseille Jean-Claude Gaudin, they chanted “Gaudin the murderer,” “Blood on his hands, put him in handcuffs!,” “Elected and responsible, justice now,” “Gaudin resign” and “Gaudin in prison.”

The tragedy has produced a wave of sympathy from the populace. Clothing collections have been organized for the building inhabitants who survived but lost all their belongings. Following the newspaper *La Marseillaise*, people across the region have published Tweets under the hashtag #ShowYourSlum, denouncing the conditions in which the authorities and building owners force workers to live in.

At the start of the week, police searched the homes of the building owners and the local city council offices. It is established that these authorities aware of the

conditions that the occupants were living in. The day after thousands took part in solemn marches demanding his resignation, the mayor of Marseille was compelled to admit that he had not “done enough.”

Since the building collapses, 700 more people have been evacuated from their homes as a precaution.

To pay tribute to the victims, protesters tagged the date of the drama in red letters on the city quay. A participant told the *Express*, “I cried a lot, even though I’m not from [the neighbourhood] Noailles. The city council, the Regional Health Authority, the government; they are all guilty of murder.”

One of her friends proposed to rename the town hall as the “place of martyrs.”

Violent clashes broke out at the end of the protest. Faced with a second protest against the council, Gaudin, the police prefecture and the council decided to send riot police to intimidate the protesters and prevent them from reaching the council building, further raising tensions. Faced with expressions of outrage against the conditions for workers in the city, the police fired tear gas to force the protesters to disperse.

The clashes lasted more than an hour. At 9 p.m., most of the protesters had left, with 200-300 people continuing to occupy the street facing the town hall, before slowly being forcibly dispersed. Police arrested five people.

The protest takes place against the backdrop of a rise in class struggle in France and across Europe. Since the beginning of 2018, railway workers, workers at Air France, teachers and energy workers, as well as the students who occupied universities have come into struggle against Macron. In Germany, metal workers went on strike, following the example of their Turkish counterparts, and educators and rail workers in Britain. Belgium has been shaken by mass demonstrations

against fuel price increases.

Two thirds of young people in Europe say they are ready to participate in an uprising, 50 years after the May-June 1968 general strike in France. In the United States polls show that the youth would prefer socialism to capitalism.

The demonstration in Marseille takes place days before scheduled “yellow vests” protests over fuel prices. Hundreds of thousands of people, including workers, small businessmen, and truck owner-operators, plan to blockade roads to protest Macron’s moves to place the burden of the budget crisis on the backs of motorists. The government is particularly fearful that the protesters will organize themselves independently of the unions, which limits their ability to contain and strangle the movement.

The police repression in Marseille is a warning to youth and workers who are fighting against Macron. A class gulf separates the demands of the protesters from the ruling class, which has no response to the crisis but police repression, in order to suppress opposition to Macron’s agenda of austerity and militarism.

The powers provided to police are the outcome of the measures put in place by successive governments aimed at responding to struggles of workers and youth. The previous Socialist Party government of François Hollande set in place the state of emergency, providing unlimited powers to the police, which Macron has since inscribed into law—notably mass surveillance on the population and so-called anti-terror laws. Macron is preparing censorship measures against Facebook to clamp down on social opposition.

The struggle against squalid housing cannot be disconnected from the struggle against social inequality and the police state measures put in place by the PS and Macron. Unable to pursue its policies through the traditional structures of democracy, the ruling class is building a police state to impose its agenda through force, while remaining totally indifferent to the resulting loss of life, be it from building collapses in France, or wars abroad.



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