

French worker sentenced to six months' jail over Facebook call for demonstrations

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In a series of actions this past week, the government of French President Emmanuel Macron has intensified police-state repression aimed at crushing “yellow vest” protests against social inequality.

On Tuesday, January 8, 28-year-old protester Hedi Martin was sentenced to six months' jail without parole at a correctional tribunal in the southern town of Narbonne. His sole “crime” was to have published a Facebook post on January 2 that called for a “yellow vest” blockade of the petrol refinery at Port-la-Nouvelle. Police arrested him in the early hours of January 3, shortly after he published the post.

The statements of the state prosecutor and judge at Martin's hearing made clear that the jailing is aimed at intimidating calls for protests. The president of the tribunal, Philippe Romanello, denounced him for having a “definite notoriety” from his Facebook Live videos standing on roundabouts at yellow vest protests in the region, noting that he had resigned from his short-term contract at a chocolate factory to “spend between four and seven hours every day” demonstrating.

Quoting from Martin's Facebook posts, Romanello continued, “This message [posted on January 2] gives one the impression that you are at the centre of information.” Martin's post had called for “standing up to the CRS [riot police]” who have been brutally attacking demonstrators with flash-bang grenades, bean-bag bullets, tear gas and baton charges. “What did you mean by this?” Romanello asked. “You can understand that the message is ambiguous.”

The state prosecutor, Marie-Agnès Joly, had demanded an even harsher sentence of two years' imprisonment and a three-year ban from protesting in public places for Martin, but admitted that he had not committed any actual violent acts. “It's not a matter of blaming him for carrying out an act (violence or public

damage), but of participation in a violent movement,” she said.

Such arguments, trampling underfoot constitutionally protected rights to strike and protest, belong to the judicial arsenal of a fascistic police state, not a democratic republic. According to this logic, tens of thousands of people who have participated in the yellow vest protests could be thrown in jail.

After a brief reprieve over the Christmas and New Year period, the yellow vest protests have grown in size for the past two weeks. The government's own figures, widely disputed as underestimates, admit that 80,000 people participated last Saturday, up from 50,000 the week before. It is reacting with a further intensification of its police crackdown.

Images surfaced on social media this week confirming that riot police stationed near the Arc de Triomphe in Paris last Saturday afternoon were brandishing semi-automatic Heckler & Koch G36 weapons with live ammunition cartridges.

Local demonstrators reported that the officers were riot police and not part of a specialised firearms unit. A French National Police spokesman confirmed to the *Daily Mail* that the officers were equipped with the firearms, but would not discuss their operational use “for security reasons.”

Last week, however, Luc Ferry, the education minister from 2002 to 2004 under conservative President Jacques Chirac, called for police to use live fire on yellow vest protests. “What I don't understand is why we don't give the police the means to put an end to this violence,” he told the “Free Spirits” programme on Classic Radio on January 7.

Asked if this would require using live ammunition, he replied: “So what? Listen, frankly, when you see guys beating up an unfortunate policeman on the ground,

that's when they should use their weapons, once and for all! That's enough."

Calling for the deployment of the military, Ferry said: "We have the fourth largest army in the world, and it is able to put an end to these c--ts." He added: "These kinds of thugs, these kinds of c--ts from the extreme right, the extreme left and from the housing estates that come to hit the police, that's enough."

The working class in France and internationally must be warned: Opposition to plans for mass repression now being hatched at the top echelons of the capitalist state is a critical task.

Ferry's denunciations of the yellow vests are not the isolated ravings of a madman. The bourgeoisie across Europe is stunned and terrified by a mass mobilisation of workers and youth to demand an end to rising social inequality and the policies of Macron and his predecessors—slashing taxes for the rich, boosting military spending and imposing brutal austerity on the working class. Unable to devise any other policies to protect its wealth amid the deepest crisis of world capitalism since the 1930s, the ruling class is publicly discussing the resort to mass repression.

The fact that police are being armed with live semi-automatic weapons at demonstrations shows that preparations are being made to respond accordingly. It is ever clearer that Macron's statement last November of his sympathies for fascist dictator Philippe Pétain, who collaborated with the Nazi occupation of France, was not a historical remark but a statement profoundly reflecting the class character of his government.

All the European imperialist powers solidarised themselves with Egyptian General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, the butcher of Cairo, who has drowned revolutionary protests in blood since 2013, in the wake of the 2011 revolution. As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted at the time, the response of the European powers supporting the dictator was proof of their own willingness to use the same methods against workers in their own countries.

The political crisis caused by the upsurge of the class struggle is exposing the real nature of capitalist "democracy." The young worker Hedi Martin is thrown in jail for six months for a Facebook post calling on protesters to "stand up" to riot police, while a former minister is provided airtime on national radio to deliver fascist rants calling for mass murder of protesters.

Meanwhile, in Bordeaux, Olivier B., a volunteer firefighter and father of three, remains in hospital in an induced coma, after police shot him in the head with a bean-bag gun and threw a stun grenade at him last Saturday. Doctors have reported he is in a stable condition but has suffered a brain hemorrhage and already undergone one operation.

The incident only became publicly known through a bystander video shared on social media, showing Olivier lying still face-down on the ground after a group of police turned a corner and fired on him. Many other protesters have had their hands or legs blown up, lost eyes or suffered permanent injuries from police bean-bag bullets.

Yesterday evening, President Macron arrived in the small Normandy town of Grand-Bourgtherolde to launch his fraudulent "national debate" aimed at pacifying popular opposition with empty promises of "dialogue." In anticipation of protests, riot police closed down areas of the town and were given power to order anyone in the area to immediately remove a yellow vest, on pain of a €135 fine.

A local reporter tweeted a photo of police photographing the ID cards of protesters, quoting a demonstrator who noted that police were creating a database of political opponents.



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