Unanswered questions on French police role in Saturday “yellow vest” clashes

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The escalation of repression by the Macron government after Saturday’s clashes with protesters on the Champs-Élysées in Paris, during the 18th weekly “yellow vest” protests, raises the most serious questions as to the government’s role. No evidence has been provided that the violence was caused by “yellow Vest” protesters. But the Élysée is seeking to tear up the right to protest on the basis of these murky events, which sections of the state apparatus itself have attributed to far-right forces.

On Monday, the government announced that protests could be banned in areas where violence had previously occurred, if police declare that “extreme elements” could be present among the protesters. But it is precisely the question of the police’s own role that is raised by Saturday’s events, which saw numerous buildings set on fire, notably Fouquet’s restaurant.

The police, which were filmed ransacking the merchandise store of the Paris Saint-Germain football club, are now threatening the “yellow vests” with a major escalation of violence. Frédéric Lagache, the general secretary of the Alliance police union which is tied to neo-fascists, called for the injuring of demonstrators: “We should be willing to clash with them and maybe cause some injuries. We’re not going up against choir-boys.”

Interior minister Christophe Castaner added: “On Saturday, on the Champs-Élysées, there were no Yellow Vests, just people acting in a logic of war who wanted to take back the Arc de Triomphe. There were 10,000 rioters on the Champs-Élysées.” That is, the anti-riot police force just created by the government could treat all “yellow vests,” including peaceful protesters, as looters to attack and injure.

This gross amalgam, concocted even as suspicions remain as to the role of police themselves, raises the most serious questions. Is the government using provocations organized with the support of elements in the police to justify an intensification of repression? These questions are raised by declarations from top figures in the state apparatus, who possess considerable information provided by the police and domestic intelligence agencies.

On Saturday, the Socialist Party mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, reacted to the violence by declaring: “What I saw tonight were extreme right groups who want to destabilize democracy, and groups of looters.”

She also pointed to the responsibility of police for the violence that erupted on the Champs-Élysées: “It ought to be possible to take control of a situation like the one we just passed through.”

Naturally, Hidalgo chose her words and took care not to express herself in a way that would raise questions as to the role of the state machine, of which she is herself an important cog. But it is necessary to ask the questions which are directly posed by such statements.

If far-right groups are indeed responsible, then which far-right groups are they? Who are their leaders, and who gave orders to set different shops and buildings on fire? Are there ties between the far-right groups that ransacked the Champs-Élysées, according to Hidalgo, and those, for example, who are now appealing the conviction of their ex-members for the fascist murder of Clement Méric?

Given the vast powers that the state has to monitor electronic communications and mobile phones, how is it possible that they do not know the identities of those responsible?

And if, as Hidalgo claims, the responsibility for the violence lies with far-right forces that threaten democracy, what conclusions should one draw about the role of the government? Why are Macron and his

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ministers silent about the role of the far right, besides the fact that this discredits their claim that the “yellow vests” and those who support them—some 70 percent of the French population—are responsible for the violence?

Is the government, which is largely unpopular because of its policies of austerity and militarism on behalf of the super-rich, using right-wing provocations to crush by force the opposition of workers and youth to its diktat?

An analysis of the remarks of the junior interior minister, Laurent Nuñez, on Monday with RTL, raises the same questions as the remarks of Hidalgo.

Asked why the police did not manage to turn back the looters, Nuñez replied: “In the pursuit of operations, we were less aggressive and less proactive than normal.”

Nonetheless, he defended the record of the police forces: “The work of the police forces is absolutely not placed in doubt.” But their work is in fact in doubt, as videos have been shared widely on social media showing police looting stores on Champs-Élysées. Nuñez’s statements amount to a cover-up of the dubious and murky role of his own forces.

Given Hidalgo’s allegations fn the role of neo-fascists on Saturday, the question is also raised as to whether the police forces’ well-known sympathy for the far right played a role in their decision to be “less aggressive” against the looters.

Nuñez alleged on RTL that the popular hostility toward the use of rubber bullets, which have put out the eyes of dozens of protesters, was to blame, as it left the police demoralized and terrified to act in the face of violent protesters. This explanation does not hold water. In fact, the police actions on Saturday were both aggressive and proactive against the “yellow vests.” It is against the looters that there was a demobilization of the police.

On Saturday, the Paris police prefect planned for the deployment of 5,000 agents, or approximately 40 companies of riot police, including 1,500 specifically tasked with arresting violent protesters. The day before the weekend, a police source confirmed to the JDD that it anticipated the presence of anarchist “Black Bloc” protesters who would “be looking for a fight.” As a result, stepped-up police searches were carried out on roads leading to the capital city and also in Paris train stations in order to apprehend those police alleged to be violent protesters.

Police repression began earlier than usual at Saturday’s protest, as police fired water cannon and heavy volleys of “incapacitating” tear gas from the military police’s armored vehicles around 11 a.m. A helicopter overflew the Champs-Élysées district.

Despite this vast police apparatus, including barricades and police checkpoints set up all around the Champs-Élysées, masked and armed demonstrators were somehow able to reach the avenue and pillage the stores—which certain policemen appear to have begun to do, as well.

No serious investigation has been made of these widely reported facts, or of these statements by top officials, that together raise serious questions about the Macron government, the state and the entire political establishment.

But workers and youth have every right to politically oppose attempts to install a police-state regime violating basic democratic rights, and the ruling elite efforts to justify this by claiming thousands of “yellow vest” protesters are responsible for acts of violence that they did not commit.

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