New police crackdown in France as Macron to announce further austerity cuts

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As French President Emmanuel Macron is set to announce new social attacks on the working class in a speech on Thursday, the government is stepping up its police crackdown against social opposition and "yellow vest" protesters opposing social inequality.

At last Saturday's "yellow vest" protest, police were once again given free rein to violently assault and arrest protesters. A video from Paris posted on Twitter and shared more than 2,500 times showed one such incident: As a swarm of riot police charge at a group of demonstrators, an officer runs up behind a lone woman walking away with her back turned, and beats her in the back of the head with his baton. The officer keeps running as the woman falls unconscious to the ground. Other police run past, stepping over her motionless body.

More than 60,000 police were mobilised across the country, using water cannon, tear gas and rubber bullets. The Interior Ministry reported that it had detained more than 200 people and that 17,000 people were stopped and searched as they tried to enter the capital.

A number of incidents indicate that the police are increasingly targeting journalists reporting on police repression. Gaspard Glanz, a freelance reporter and founder of Taranis News, was arrested and, as of this writing, remains in detention. Glanz was clearly identifiable as a journalist on Saturday. He approached a group of riot police and demanded to speak to the captain, after he said the police had shot at him with a stun grenade and was physically pushed away by police.

When Glanz allegedly gestured at them with his middle finger while walking away, police threw him to the ground and arrested him.

Glanz has been detained for more than 48 hours and is reportedly being charged for "participation in a group aiming to commit violence or damages" and "offence against officials representing the public authority."

Hundreds of people protested outside the Paris police offices yesterday evening, and a petition launched by Glanz's father demanding his release has been signed by more than 18,000 people. The petition states that "the free and independent press is prevented from operating in our country. Gaspard Glanz fights for freedom of information, a fundamental condition for the preservation of our liberty."

Another journalist, Clement Lanot, published a video on Twitter showing police taking aim and firing at him with a rubber bullet gun. A third female journalist was also reportedly badly injured when a stun grenade exploded on her hand. A video on social media shows her being carried away by other protesters.

Last Saturday was the first weekly "yellow vest" protest since the fire on Monday night at the Notre Dame cathedral. The Macron government immediately sought to exploit this event, which was the outcome of the socially destructive policies of the French ruling class, its reckless gutting of social expenditure and funnelling of wealth to the corporate elite, to demand national "unity" and call for an end to protests against the government.

On Friday evening, Interior Minister Christopher Castaner used this argument to declare at a press conference that "the rioters" had "not been touched by what happened at Notre Dame," and so would "be out once again." "The threat is serious and calls for an enhanced response," he said.

Signs at the protests opposed the fact that while nothing is being made available for the working class, large corporations and their billionaire owners are being subsidised to posture as generous benefactors to

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society by donating a tiny fraction of the billions they have taken from the labour of the working class to the Notre Dame repairs. Most of these “donations” will be borne by the working class in the form of a 60 percent tax rebate.

A number of banners in several cities opposed the arrest and planned extradition to the United States of WikiLeaks journalist and whistleblower Julian Assange. In Paris, a banner stated “Vive Assange,” and in Toulouse, a mask of Assange was placed over the statue of Joan of Arc. These actions express the widespread support for Assange in the French and international working class.

The government’s violent crackdown takes place as Macron is due to give a speech Thursday that will include further social cuts. He had been due to give the speech last Monday to summarise the results of the so-called Grand Debate, a fraudulent spectacle of town hall-style meetings and online surveys aimed solely at promoting the illusion that the government, a representative of the corporate and financial elite, will respond to the demands of the population.

The speech was called off during the Notre Dame fire, but a leaked version published by *Lundi Matin* revealed the measures that were to be announced. While the speech is couched as a response to the demands of the mass protests, all the measures it contains will either do nothing to improve or will significantly reduce workers’ living standards.

It rejects any overturning of Macron’s slashing of the fortune tax on the super-rich. Instead, “taxes will be lowered for those who work by significantly reducing income tax.” These measures invariably combine negligible tax cuts for workers with large tax cuts for the rich. Moreover, they are to be funded by “cuts to our public expenditure” and “the necessity to work more.”

The last measure was detailed this weekend by government deputy and spokeswoman Aurore Bergé, in an interview with *Le Journal de Dimanche*. She said the government is planning to create a new “day of solidarity”—i.e., the abolition of a public holiday—to force workers to work an extra day every year for free. She cited May 8, which marks the victory of the allied powers over Nazi Germany in World War II.

“I am persuaded that the French are willing to work more if we explain to them 100 percent that the income of the day of solidarity will be devoted to the reduction of taxes or financing pensions,” she said.

The only measure nominally aimed at addressing the crisis of public services is a pledge not to close any more schools and hospitals until the end of Macron’s current term. This comes amid a massive wave of school and hospital closures that have devastated entire regions of the country.

A study conducted by *Le Monde* in March revealed that in the 22 years from 1997 to 2019, more than 338 maternity hospitals out of 885 were closed. As a result, the number of adult women living more than 45 minutes from a maternity hospital almost tripled, from 290,000 to 716,000. The percentage living more than 30 minutes away more than doubled from 12.6 percent to 26 percent.

Many surgery departments have also been closed, under conditions where heavy snow in some regions of France can make it impossible to travel long distances for treatment.

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