

Unrest spreads in France in response to police brutality

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Tuesday evening saw the fourth successive night in France of escalating youth protests and clashes with riot police in the suburbs of Paris and other major cities.

The unrest was immediately triggered by the latest act of police brutality. On Saturday night, a police officer in Villeneuve-la-Garenne, a town in the Hauts-de-Seine department just north of Paris, opened his car door as a 30-year-old motorcyclist passed. The young man suffered a badly broken leg after the incident and remains in hospital.

Video showing the victim spread rapidly on social media, alongside testimony from numerous witnesses indicating the policeman had intentionally opened the door in the motorcycle's path. The police car was unmarked, and police have acknowledged they did not use their sirens or lights, while also admitting they were trying to stop the victim.

Anis Kesraoui, a friend of the victim's family, told *France Television*, "The police car...was not marked 'police,' and it was black. The car was stopped at the lights and the bike came up from down there. And here, he [the policeman] deliberately opened the door." He added, "We can see on the video that the impact is on the interior of the door and not the exterior."

Other residents who were present at the scene said the officer smelled of alcohol. According to *Le Monde*, he was a ranked commissioner, of which there are approximately 1,200 in France and over 100 in the Paris region.

The police account has shifted. As documented by *Libération*, an initial police report claimed the officer was standing outside his car and attempted to stop the motorcyclist, who refused and then crashed as he attempted to escape. This claim appears to have been dropped—later accounts admitted the officer was inside

his vehicle when the door was opened.

The victim is suing the police for intentional violence. His lawyer, Stéphane Gas, has stated that "my client was returning from his house and the police gave no sign of their presence; they did not even turn on their police light, and there was therefore no refusal to obey police instructions." He told *Libération*, "My client is firm on this point. He said: 'There is no question, I had the right to pass, the door was closed and was opened at the moment I passed by the car. There was no officer outside.'"

Heavily armed police have arrested dozens of youth in clashes over the last four nights, with the youth responding with fireworks and throwing rocks. Although the clashes began in Ville-la-Garenne, they have spread to other areas in the neighboring Seine-Saint-Denis region, to Nanterre, northwest of Paris, and last night to other cities, including outside Lyon.

France has seen repeated outbreaks of urban revolts in the impoverished suburbs around its major cities. In October 2005, two youth were killed while fleeing from police in the *banlieues* outside Paris, igniting riots over inequality, poverty and relentless police harassment and violence, disturbances that were brutally suppressed by riot police. The Sarkozy government enacted a state of emergency nationally and arrested more than 2,800 people over the course of several weeks.

The latest act of wanton police brutality comes on top of the conditions of inequality that have only worsened since 2005, as the financial aristocracy in France has siphoned off ever-greater sums of wealth while social programs and decent-paying jobs have been destroyed.

In the Seine-Saint-Denis region, the unemployment rate is more than double the national average and more than one in three 15- to 24-year-olds are unemployed.

These conditions have only been exacerbated by the

Macron administration's response to the coronavirus pandemic. Seine-Saint-Denis and areas of Hauts-de-Seine have been among the hardest hit by the pandemic. The most recently available government data, for March 13 to April 6, reveal that—after the eastern region of France where the coronavirus was first concentrated—Seine-Saint-Denis has seen the largest increase in mortality over last year of any department in the country, 101 percent.

Seine-Saint-Denis has just 0.5 hospital beds per 10,000 inhabitants, approximately one third the percentage in Paris proper, which itself has an entirely inadequate supply of beds that has rapidly been overwhelmed by the pandemic.

Because of the Macron administration's refusal to provide significant support, the lockdown has been an economic and social disaster for broad sections of workers and youth. They are confined in cramped living quarters, with family members on top of one another and unable to go outside. Moreover, working class families are now also unable to access vital subsidized school lunch programs where children eat for €1 per day.

Lines for free food distribution in the Seine-Saint-Denis area over the past week have grown continuously and now stretch for hundreds of meters.

A report in *Le Parisien* on Tuesday focused on one local charity distributing food to confined families in Villeneuve-la-Garenne, where Saturday's police violence occurred. A 40-year-old mother, whose husband works as a trash collector and is now dependent on charity to feed her children, said: "The canteen cost us less than 100 euros per month to feed our three children. The food budget has exploded with the confinement. We have already spent 500 euros and we are only halfway through the month."

Other workers described combining lunch and dinner or skipping meals entirely so that their children could eat. "Before, I volunteered in food distributions," said Soumaya, "and now I've become a recipient."

In his speech on Monday last week, President Emmanuel Macron announced an insulting one-off payment to the most impoverished families of €150 per child. Four days later, the government signed into law a payment of €20 billion (US\$21.6 billion) to the largest French corporations, including Renault and Airbus.

All the official parties of France are implicated in the

social catastrophe laid bare by the pandemic and that lies behind the youth rebellions: from the Socialist Party (PS) which has participated in decades of austerity, slashing essential health and social services to the bone, to the trade unions and their pseudo-left allies such as the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA), who have sabotaged any independent struggle by the working class and propped up the PS.

The police crackdown on the protests is a function of the extreme fear in the ruling class of social revolution. Within ruling circles, the central element in plans for "de-confinement" is preparation for a police-state crackdown against an inevitable eruption of opposition to the reactionary policies of the ruling class.

An article published by *Le Parisien* on April 11, headlined, "Confinement: Why the 'days after' worry the intelligence agencies," cites internal documents produced by the Central Service of Territorial Surveillance (SCRT) on April 7, 8 and 9. The documents observe: "The 'day after' is a theme that is strongly mobilizing protest movements. The confinement does not permit broad masses to express themselves, but anger is not waning, and the [government] management of the crisis, which has been highly criticized, is encouraging opposition."

The *Gala* website cited an unnamed ministry adviser on Friday asserting that "there will be a *dégagiste* [demands for the downfall of the government] movement after the crisis. It's the end of all of us." The term *dégager* (resign) was a main slogan of the Tunisian revolution of 2011.



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