

Police in Seine-Saint-Denis suburbs of Paris prepare for food riots

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The COVID-19 pandemic is exposing the class gulf separating workers from the financial aristocracy, which refuses to ensure decent health and food conditions for masses of people.

As imperialist governments shower financial markets with trillions of euros (or dollars), the World Food Program foresees that the number of people facing starvation this year could double to 265 million. Food riots have erupted in Africa and Latin America, from Cape Town to Caracas, and could break out in some of the world's wealthiest cities.

In an email to the police prefect of the Île-de-France region around Paris, Georges-François Leclerc, the police prefect of the Seine-Saint-Denis department, stressed his concern that food riots could break out in his department, the poorest in the Paris metropolitan area. The satirical weekly *Le Canard enchaîné* reported the content of his email: "The greatest risk I face in the next fifteen days, apart from health risks, is the food danger."

Leclerc added that if "risks" of food riots threaten the western Val-d'Oise suburbs, they are "at maximum" in the northern and eastern suburbs of Seine-Saint-Denis: "We have 15,000 to 20,000 people in slums, emergency shelters and migrant worker camps who will have a hard time finding enough to eat. The underground economy, theft, the 'Uber-economy', and the collapse of temp work have all seen a large, sudden collapse in revenues for precarious workers in Seine-Saint-Denis."

This follows repeated clashes in the Paris metropolitan area after a policeman in Villeneuve-la-Garenne, a suburb north of Paris, opened his car door right in front of a 30-year-old motorcyclist as he passed by. The man suffered a very serious compound fracture to his leg and is still in hospital, where he has launched

a lawsuit against police.

Since then, there have been repeated clashes in Villeneuve-la-Garenne and nearby Nanterre and Gennevilliers between police and local inhabitants, as residents have thrown stones and other objects at approaching police cars, and cars were also burned in Bagneux. Of 700 housing complexes classified as "dangerous" by French domestic intelligence, 65 have seen rioting.

The Seine-Saint-Denis department is densely populated and has a large concentration of workers from immigrant backgrounds. Many workers live from precarious jobs, and even before the pandemic, the unemployment rate was twice France's national average of 8 percent, while more than one-third of 15-to-24-year-olds were out of work.

Without a vaccine or a cure for the virus, the only way for workers to keep safe from COVID-19 is to shelter at home. However, the unemployment subsidies and few hundred euros in supplementary family benefits announced by President Emmanuel Macron for working class families do not allow them to live in confinement, whereas hundreds of billions of euros have been handed out to the banks and major corporations. The global pandemic is exposing the social inequality produced by capitalism and the bankruptcy of the so-called "French social model."

While the Macron government has called on private firms to pay a €1,000 tax-free bonus to workers who are still on the job doing emergency tasks, many workers in Seine-Saint-Denis have seen no such bonuses. "The €1,000 euro bonus, I don't have a right to it," Stéphane Lafeuille, a temp garbage collector, told the press, complaining of the danger of waiting in long lines for food handouts amid an epidemic: "With the other temp workers, we live constantly in great

danger. If we fill our fridges, we get coronavirus.”

“Fear is everywhere. If I catch the virus, I have nothing, no safety net,” he added.

Many children, who rely on school lunches for their only balanced meal, are going hungry with schools shut down and the state doing nothing to guarantee the population’s survival. When the Seine-Saint-Denis council requisitioned a cafeteria at a Clichy-sous-Bois school to fix 1,500 meals, it turned out that 3,000 people needed to eat; a second cafeteria still needs to be requisitioned.

In his mail, the police prefect Leclerc warned that “what we could get away with for one month of confinement, we can’t get away with for two months... when we can only distribute tickets for 15 days to 9,500 people whereas we need to feed 15,000 to 20,000 people.”

Workers, in particular in Seine-Saint-Denis, also make up the bulk of the deaths from the illness: their presence at work exposes them to the virus, whereas the lack of infrastructure prevents them from respecting social distancing measures. The latest available state demographic statistics, for March 13-April 6, showed that after eastern France, where the coronavirus first broke out, Seine-Saint-Denis has seen the largest increase in mortality over the same period last year of any region of France: 101.8 percent.

The Seine-Saint-Denis department furnishes the labor sacrificed by the ruling class so that society can be kept running, fed and cared for. The many nurses, deliverymen, territorial agents and medical assistants who live in this area cannot telecommute to work like 57 percent of management staff, or flee Paris to second residences in the countryside as large parts of the upper-middle classes and the bourgeoisie have done.

Seine-Saint-Denis workers not only are the most exposed to COVID-19 and to the food insecurity that flows from it, but also are less well cared for. Seine-Saint-Denis only has 0.5 hospital beds per 10,000 residents—only a third of the percentage of the city of Paris proper, which itself has a totally insufficient supply of hospital beds that was rapidly depleted by the onrush of cases from the pandemic.

Sylvie Thomassin, the mayor of the town of Bondy in Seine-Saint-Denis, said she had never signed so many death certificates day after day, adding that it was linked to overcrowding and precarious living: “We

have a lot of social housing, which is often too small, and so it is hard for residents not to bump into each other at home. ... Obviously this living at close quarters makes things worse.”

Frédéric Adnet, the head of emergency medical services in the department, said, “It is quite simple, there are more deaths in Seine-Saint-Denis because there are more infections. ... The virus circulates far more easily here than elsewhere. Confinement is hard in impoverished areas like ours, where there are many large families in tiny apartments, housing complexes for migrant workers and slums. It is well known that infectious diseases affect the precarious more, because contagion is easier and they are harder to follow for treatment.”

It is an unanswerable condemnation of the social order that in the very cities where the “essential” workers live who resupply, feed and care for the population as a whole, countless thousands are going hungry or falling ill and dying without proper care. The vast bank and corporate bailouts benefitting the super-rich must be expropriated, and these vast social resources used to properly care for the oppressed masses of the working class.



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