Hundreds of thousands protest across France against police violence and Macron's police immunity law

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Hundreds of thousands of people joined demonstrations across France on Saturday afternoon to protest police violence and oppose the Macron government's law to criminalize the filming of the police. Opposition is growing amid a series of acts of police violence over the past week.

More than 100 protests were organized across every major city. The largest protest, which took place in Paris, began at Republic Square at 2:00 p.m. and marched to the Place de la Bastille. The government's own underestimated account claimed that 46,000 people were in Paris alone, but images and videos show that the real number was several times higher. There were more than 10,000 in Bordeaux and Lille, and thousands in Marseille, Lyon, and Toulouse.

The police responded with a violent crackdown on the protests, particularly in Paris, where hundreds of riot police were deployed. This included the beating of 24-year-old Syrian freelance photographer Ameer Al-Halbi, who works with AFP, at the Place de la Bastille. Reporters Without Borders general secretary Christophe Deloire published a tweet of Al-Halbi in a hospital with his head and faced bandaged on Saturday evening, stating that he had been hit in the face with a police truncheon.

Gabrielle Cézard, another journalist who was with Al-Halbi in a narrow street when the police attacked, said, "We were identifiable as photographers and stuck against the wall. We cried, 'Press, press!' There were projectiles thrown from the side of the protesters. Then the police led a charge, truncheons in hand. Ameer was the only photographer not wearing a helmet or armband. I lost him from my sight and then found him surrounded by people, his face covered in blood and bandages."

In another video, a riot police officer can be seen pointing a beanbag gun point blank at the face of another journalist.

The "global security" law, which was passed by the National Assembly on Monday and will go to the Senate in January, would make it an offense punishable by a €45,000 fine and three years in jail to publish a video showing the face of a police officer. In addition, it expands the powers of off-duty police to carry their firearms, by requiring that they not be refused entry to any public places for carrying a weapon. The law also provides a blanket permission for the use of drones to film protesters by police, which had already been in practice.

The mass turnout on Saturday was also triggered by anger at two incidents of police violence in the past week. On Monday, riot police went on a rampage at Republic Square, attacking a peaceful encampment of between 450 and 500 refugees set up to protest the lack of housing, government support and the approval of their asylum claims.

On Thursday, Loopsider published a video of a vicious police assault of black music producer Michel Zecler in his Paris recording studio. The video has now been seen more than 20 million times. In it, Zecler narrates minute by minute while watching the CCTV footage showing police attacking him for over 20 minutes, repeatedly kicking, punching and hitting him with a truncheon on the head and face, and calling him a "dirty negro."

The police threw Zecler in prison for 48 hours and falsely charged him with assaulting them, before being forced to drop all charges when presented with the

CCTV footage.

The "global security" law is correctly recognized as aimed at providing the police with enhanced impunity to use violence against the population. Over the past two years, not a single policeman was charged for the brutal crackdowns on "yellow vest" protests and railway strikes, during which dozens of people had their eyes shot out and hands blown off by stun grenades and bean bag bullets. On the contrary, the riot police commander whose unit fired the tear gas canister that killed the 80-year-old woman Zineb Redouane in Marseille was among the 9,000 police bestowed with medals of honor, as was the head of the unit that raided a music concert in Nantes that caused the drowning of 24-year-old Steve Canico.

Facing an explosion of opposition in the population, Macron released a statement on Facebook on Friday, stating that the beating of Zecler "brings us shame." Macron, whose routine police violence against peaceful protests has been condemned by international human rights organizations, absurdly proclaimed his support for the "right to protest," and that "every citizen must be able to express his convictions and demands, safe from all violence and pressure."

Three police involved in the beating of Zecler have been placed in temporary detention. The government has announced an internal review of the attack on the refugee encampment on Monday, including the assault of journalist Remy Buisine, by its internal police investigators (IGPN), whose role is to investigate police but inevitably clear them of all wrongdoing.

On Thursday, Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin falsely claimed in an interview on the 8 p.m. France2 evening news that Buisine had refused to testify in the IGPN investigation, which Buisine has refuted in a tweet, stating that no one had attempted to contact him.

The Socialist Party (PS), the Greens and Jean-Luc Mélenchon's Unsubmisive France party have intervened into the protest movement to channel it behind empty appeals for police reform. These parties all support the buildup of a police state against growing opposition in the working class over social inequality, and backed the imposition of the two-year state of emergency by the PS under President François Hollande. They are terrified over the possibility of an explosion of working class anger and the development of a movement of the working class against capitalism.

Hollande published a statement on Twitter calling on Macron to withdraw the "global security" law, adding that there is "more honour" in withdrawing a law "when the risk is to create incomprehension and violence."

LFI deputy Adrien Quatennens called on Darmanin to "go in the direction of de-escalation" through the "removal of the [Paris police] prefect [Didier] Lallement and the withdrawal of the law that is contested even in the ranks of the [governing] majority."

Mélenchon, speaking to reporters at the protest on Saturday, said that "it is time to proceed to take in hand the police and, to be more clear, to a refounding of the police." He gave no details about what such a "refounding" would involve, except to declare that in a "democratic" government the police would be "guardians of the peace."

Mélenchon's aim is to conceal from workers the essential historical role of the police as the direct repressive arms of the capitalist state, tasked with protecting the interest of a tiny capitalist elite that has amassed immense wealth against popular opposition from below. Macron's rapid turn to the building of an authoritarian police state is part of a turn towards dictatorship by capitalist governments around the world: from Brazil and the United States, to Germany, where the fascist Alternative for Germany has been elevated to the official opposition party in the German parliament.

This process is being fueled by the tremendous growth of social inequality that has been intensified by the coronavirus pandemic. The answer to this strategy of the ruling class is the building of an international revolutionary movement of the working class to overthrow capitalism and establish workers' states, expropriate the wealth of the financial elite, and reorganize economy to meet social need.

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