

Sixty years since the massacre of Algerians in Paris on October 17, 1961

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Sixty years ago, shortly before the end of the Algerian War and its independence from France in March 1962, French police carried out a horrific massacre in Paris. Led by Paris prefect Maurice Papon, who had been a top Nazi-collaborationist during World War II, police attacked a peaceful protest against a racist curfew imposed on Algerians by Papon. Even today, the number of killed by police, often estimated at around 200, remains unknown.

A fascistic fury seized Paris cops, less than 20 years after French police had led the 1942 Vél d'Hiv roundup of 13,000 Jews that began the Holocaust in Occupied France. Screaming "Eat the towel heads," police fired at point-blank range at men, women and children; beat dozens of people unconscious and threw them into the Seine River; and arrested between 7,500 and 12,000 people. They detained thousands of wounded in horrific conditions in mass detention centers, without proper medical care, and deported hundreds to French concentration camps in Algeria.

Sixty years later, these events constitute a warning for workers in France and internationally on the role of the capitalist state machine, even when nominally democratic. Indeed, the massacre resonates so powerfully with the rise of fascistic, police-state policies across the imperialist "democracies" today that it virtually seems contemporary.

French President Emmanuel Macron attended a commemoration of the massacre yesterday but did not dare speak publicly on it. Not only is his government waging a bloody war on Algeria's borders, in Mali, but the Macron government has staked its survival on a permanent threat of bloody police violence against the working class. In 2018, he saluted Nazi-collaborationist dictator Philippe Pétain before loosing riot police on "yellow vest" protests against social inequality, arresting over 10,000, wounding 4,000 and killing two.

The October 17, 1961 massacre is a warning as to what powerful elements of the police-state machine, terrified of rising social anger in the working class, are now planning. Indeed, during the December 2019 French rail strike, shortly before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, far-right retired General Pierre de Villiers called for the stepped-up repression of strikes and protests in France.

"We must reestablish the balance between humanity and firmness. ... There is not enough firmness in our country," de Villiers told RTL, adding, "A gulf has opened up between those who lead and those who obey. The 'yellow vests' were a first sign of this. ... We must restore order; things cannot keep going this way."

What de Villiers meant became clearer this year, on the 60th anniversary of the failed April 21, 1961 Algiers putsch by die-hard supporters of French rule in Algeria, including de Villiers' father. This April, amid the debacle of imperialist wars in Afghanistan and Mali, his brother Philippe published an "anti-capitalist" screed denouncing Swiss bankers and COVID-19 public health measures in the far-right magazine *Current Affairs*. Then, thousands of officers signed a letter in the same magazine, threatening to intervene on French soil, leading to thousands of deaths. It was dated April 21, 2021.

All the fundamental problems of the 20th century—social inequality, war, fascism, police-state rule, and the political leadership of the working class—are openly reemerging today. The October 17, 1961 massacre is a warning as to the implications of de Villiers' threats or the January 6 neo-Nazi coup attempt by then-President Donald Trump on the US Capitol in Washington. The massacre in Paris 60 years ago unfolded not under Nazi-Vichy rule but under the Republic and the presidency of former pro-capitalist French Resistance leader Charles de Gaulle.

It was moreover passed over in almost total silence in French public life until the 1991 publication of journalist Jean-Luc Einaudi's detailed and harrowing book *The Battle of Paris: 17 October 1961*, and the 1998 trial of Papon on charges of crimes against humanity.

The massacre could not have been carried out or covered up without the complicity of the Stalinist and social-democratic parties and their allies. They blocked an intervention of the working class to halt the massacre and stop the dirty colonial war in Algeria. This underlines the necessity of building in the working class a Trotskyist opposition to Stalinist and labor bureaucracies.

The October 17, 1961 massacre

In 1961, the Algerian war was in its seventh year, having cost around 400,000 Algerian and over 10,000 French lives. Since Guy Mollet's social-democratic government sent the army to Algeria in 1956 and authorized a policy of mass torture—a measure that the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF) voted to fund in the National Assembly—state terror had ruled Algeria. At least 2.5 million people were detained in French "regroupment camps" in Algeria.

The war had seen Papon's career reach new heights. As general secretary of the police prefecture in Bordeaux during the Nazi occupation of France, he had organized French police participation in Nazi roundups of thousands of Jews for deportation to the death camps. At war's end, he provided the Gaullists intelligence and declared himself a "resistance fighter." After Mollet took office, Papon became police prefect of Constantine, in Algeria, advocating mass repression. In a September 1957 report, Papon reported that he had had 10,284 people killed and 117,000 "regrouped."

After a military coup toppled Mollet's government in 1958, installing de Gaulle back in power and inaugurating France's Fifth Republic, Papon became prefect of Paris.

In 1961, as Franco-Algerian peace talks broke down, bloodshed in France linked to the war took a new form. Early on, it was the fratricidal conflict between Algerian bourgeois nationalists as Krim Belkacem's National Liberation Front (FLN) that destroyed Messali Hadj's Algerian National Movement and cost hundreds of Algerian lives. In August 1961,

however, the FLN's French federation, ignoring opposition from the FLN leadership in Algeria, began shooting French cops.

Between August 29 and early October of 1961, panic mounted among the security forces as 11 French policemen were killed and 17 wounded. At the same time, morgues increasingly began to fill with Algerians found shot in the streets or beaten and drowned in the Seine River.

On October 2, at the demand of police trade unions, Papon met the Paris police. He gave a green light to kill Algerians, as long as these deaths could be dressed up as self-defense: "You will be covered, you have my word. Besides, when you tell headquarters a North African has been shot, the police chief who goes there has all he needs so the North African will have a gun on him because, in our times, everyone will know what that means." On October 5, Papon imposed an 8:30 p.m. to 5:30 a.m. curfew that police applied on a racist basis, to anyone in Paris they thought looked Arab.

The FLN responded to Papon's curfew by spreading in Arabic a call for a peaceful, unarmed protest of all Algerians in the Paris area for the evening of October 17, 1961. Families were told to go out with women and children, to make clear the peaceful nature of the protest.

Alerted to the protest only on the morning of October 17, Papon and French Prime Minister Michel Debré's office prepared a deployment of 8,400 men. Many Algerians working morning shifts were arrested at the factory gate as they left work, beaten and jailed before the march began. In one case documented by Einaudi, Oudina Moussa and two others were arrested at gunpoint, beaten with rifle butts at the police station and made to drink water laced with bleach until they vomited. In another, a cop walked up to a man, asked him if he was Algerian, and shot him in the stomach.

Nevertheless, that evening, at least 40,000 men, women and children marched on the FLN's call, including a group of Renault autoworkers, at Saint-Michel Bridge, Neuilly Bridge, Concord Square, the Arch of Triumph, the Garnier Opera house and elsewhere. They marched into the bloodiest massacre in Paris since the Third Republic's destruction of the Paris Commune in 1871 and the 1944 working-class insurrection against Nazi authorities.

At first, Algerians arriving at the Opera and the Arch of Triumph were herded onto buses and taken to police stations around Paris to be beaten. When the buses were filled, women and children were kept at gunpoint in the streets before the buses returned. They were then thrown into the buses together and driven off, together with a handful of bystanders who protested their treatment to police. Later on, police at the Arch of Triumph and Champs-Elysées Avenue shot protesters and used their rifle butts to beat prisoners, and a doctor who tried to treat them.

During the repression, to whip the cops into a frenzy, Papon and police authorities deliberately allowed false reports to circulate on police radio that Algerians were shooting policemen in Paris.

Police units rampaged across Paris. Concord Square metro station ran red with blood as police forced Algerians at gunpoint against the walls of the station and beat them over the head with iron bars and police batons. At Saint Michel Bridge, police baton-charged a peaceful crowd of Algerians, cordoning them off on Saint Michel Square and mercilessly beating them, leaving the square with its cafés destroyed and littered with bodies and large pools of blood.

At the Neuilly Bridge, police shot at point-blank range into the body of demonstrators and savagely attacked them with police clubs. A number of Algerians caught by police at Neuilly Bridge and surrounding areas were beaten unconscious and thrown to drown into the Seine River, washing up afterwards in working-class areas like Gennevilliers and Asnières downriver. At the same time, police rounded up inhabitants of the Algerian slum in Nanterre and took them to nearby police stations where they were savagely beaten.

Thousands of Algerians detained across the city were driven away in

Paris city buses. This later provoked a strike by Paris mass transit maintenance workers, who refused to clean buses drenched in the blood of badly wounded Algerian protesters. Together with an immigrant detention center in Vincennes, the Paris Sports Palace was turned into a mass concentration camp for the thousands of Algerians detainees.

When a bus arrived at a detention center, detainees were made to walk into the building between two rows of policemen who rained down blows with heavy truncheons. Detainees either suffered broken fingers and arms as they tried to shield their heads from the blows or, tragically, had their skulls crushed by the hysterical policemen. Police sadistically kept the Algerians in the detention centers without toilet facilities or proper medical care and waited days before providing food. Hundreds would be deported to prison camps in Algeria.

The cover-up of the massacre and the French left

Such a savage massacre, committed in public view in Paris, could not be covered up despite police efforts to confiscate film and block reporting of the atrocities. It was, in fact, widely denounced in the following days.

It proved impossible, however, for the dominant organizations of French left politics of the time, the mass Stalinist and social-democratic parties, to organize any effective action. After World War II, they had channeled a revolutionary movement in the working class against the Vichy regime behind the capitalist regime led by de Gaulle, insisting that it would be democratic and forever prevent a reemergence of fascism. Whatever atrocities the police committed, they had no intention of leading the working class in a struggle against a regime they supported and had helped create.

Less than 20 years after the end of the Nazi occupation and fall of the Vichy regime, however, it was impossible for broad masses of people not to compare the 1961 atrocity to the beginning of the fascist Holocaust of the Jews. Daniel Mayer, the social-democrat and head of the Human Rights League, likened it to "Kristallnacht in Berlin," the 1938 pogrom against Jews in Nazi Germany.

The Union of Jewish Societies of France denounced "measures of a racist character" employed in the repression, adding: "We cannot remain silent amid such persecution, as many did at the time when we were forced to wear a yellow star. ... We, the classic victims of racism, express our solidarity with the persecuted and demand that no measure of collective repression be imposed on the North African population."

However, the social-democrats and especially the Stalinist PCF, which was the dominant force in the French labor movement at the time, blocked a mobilization of the working class. The social-democratic *Le Populaire* daily, turning ever sharply to the right after Mollet led the war in Algeria, shamelessly hailed "Mr Papon ... an affable and brave man. A devoted and often humane public servant. We write this without irony, because it is true. No one can hold anything against him."

The Stalinist daily *L'Humanité* felt obliged to denounce the massacre. It demanded "the immediate freeing of all those imprisoned or interned on October 17. ... Each worker or democrat in France must feel personally threatened by these measures of a fascist character taken against Algerian workers, as these measures can tomorrow be extended to them."

The PCF statement was echoed by a meeting of students, professors and public figures in the courtyard of the Sorbonne. At the meeting, a group of widely known French intellectuals including Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, the ex-Trotskyist Laurent Schwartz, Louis Aragon, André Breton, Aimé Césaire and Pierre Vidal-Naquet launched an appeal. It read:

“By remaining passive, the French people would become complicit in the racist frenzy now overtaking Paris and that brings us back to the blackest days of the Nazi occupation. Between Algerians crowded in the Sports Palace waiting to be “sent back” and Jews jailed at Drancy awaiting deportation, we refuse to make a difference. To end this scandal, moral protests do not suffice. We the undersigned call upon all democratic parties, trade unions and organizations not only to demand the immediate abrogation of infamous measures, but to demonstrate their solidarity with Algerian workers by inviting their members to directly oppose any resurgence of such violence.”

Nonetheless, despite the Stalinists’ ringing appeals to oppose a reemerging fascist threat, France’s vast Stalinist trade union apparatus did nothing. It isolated a protest by hundreds of Chausson and Chenard autoworkers on October 20, whom police assaulted with batons. The working class was denied the opportunity to mobilize its collective industrial strength to impose an end to French imperialism’s fascistic brutalization of the Algerian people.

Stalinist organizations soon adapted to the mass detention of protesters after October 17. The Popular Aid charity collected milk for those detained in prison camps. The General Confederation of Labor’s (CGT) *Workers Life* paper buried its report of the massacre on page 8, cynically writing about murdered Algerian workers, “Our comrades marched not only because they were Algerian, but because they were workers. *Workers Life* expresses its fraternal solidarity with them. It bows before their deaths.” It thus effectively washed its hands of the massacre.

The Trotskyist movement opposed the Stalinist strangling of workers’ insurrections against fascism in Europe after World War II and of working-class opposition to the Algerian war. In the years following the massacre in Paris, however, it faced serious problems bound up with the crisis inside its own ranks, and particularly in France.

Eight years before, in 1953, the Fourth International had split, as a middle-class tendency led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel broke with Trotskyism and the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). While the ICFI defended Trotskyism, the Pabloite tendency claimed that Stalinist and bourgeois nationalist parties could offer revolutionary leadership to the working class.

The Pabloite perspective was false and adapted to the Stalinist bureaucracies that were not revolutionary opponents, but counterrevolutionary supporters of the post-war capitalist regime. The Algerian war again exposed the Pabloites’ false, anti-Trotskyist perspective. While the Algerian bourgeois nationalists fought a fratricidal conflict, which the Pabloites supported by backing the FLN, and the PCF voted to fund the war.

Pierre Lambert’s *Organisation communiste internationaliste* (OCI), which at the time was the ICFI’s French section, called for liberating Algerian detainees and fought to unite French and Algerian workers against the war. In *La Vérité des Travailleurs* it attacked the hypocrisy of the Stalinists’ pro forma criticisms of the massacre:

“These denunciations of repression are like the seasons; they come and they go. But we cannot forget that tens of thousands of men are suffering in prison, that every day more are arrested and deported to Algeria not to their home villages, but to prison camps. Different letters received by Algerians formerly detained in France report that they have arrived in camps in Algeria where children aged eight or nine are detained, together with women and the elderly.”

Calling for a broader political mobilization of the working class in support of the Algerian people, it criticized “the timidity found in Popular Aid’s appeals. This movement’s section in Renault issued an appeal to workers for ‘Christmas gifts,’ discreetly hiding that these are mainly destined for Algerian detainees. This is what is known as capitulating to racist pressure, which is all the stronger when political leaders or militants lack a firm line.”

Nonetheless, the OCI itself ultimately capitulated to mounting Pabloite, petty-bourgeois pressures to adapt to social-democratic and Stalinist organizations.

In 1968, seven years after the police’s murderous rampage in Paris and Nanterre, police repression of student protests in those cities triggered the May 1968 general strike. Red flags flew over factories across France, and the de Gaulle government collapsed as over 10 million workers struck, bringing the economy to a halt. Only the PCF and the CGT, negotiating the Grenelle Accords with the regime and preventing a working-class struggle for power, saved de Gaulle and averted revolution. Yet in the radicalized atmosphere of the time, youth poured by the thousands into the OCI.

Unfortunately, the OCI reacted by adapting to prevailing illusions in Stalinism and social democracy, breaking with Trotskyism and the ICFI in 1971 and backing the Union of the Left between the PCF and François Mitterrand’s newly founded social-democratic Socialist Party (PS). As part of its pact with Mitterrand—himself a former Nazi-collaborationist and member of the 1956-1958 Mollet government that waged the war in Algeria—the OCI conformed to the prevailing silence on the October 17, 1961 massacre. This pact proved to be a political trap for the workers.

Einaudi’s *The Battle of Paris and the trial of Papon*

Amid the crisis of the Mitterrand government that came to power in 1981 with PCF support, work began that would bring the October 17, 1961 massacre to public light. In 1986, after a wave of steel and auto strikes against austerity policies imposed by Mitterrand against the workers, former FLN officials and sympathizers handed their files on the massacre to Jean-Luc Einaudi.

Einaudi, a Maoist journalist, conducted exhaustive research to reconstitute what could be pieced together of the massacre. Based on examining internal FLN reports, consulting records from French cemeteries, and interviewing Algerian survivors of the massacre as well as French and FLN officials, he ultimately published his masterful *The Battle of Paris* in 1991. A few months after the book appeared, however, the Stalinist bureaucracy dissolved the Soviet Union and completed the restoration of capitalist rule across Eastern Europe.

Einaudi’s book reflects the widespread identification of left-wing politics with the working class and opposition to fascism and colonialism that still existed in France at the time. He dedicated it to two girls murdered in police operations overseen by Papon—Jeannette Griff, a 9-year-old Jewish girl deported from Bordeaux to Auschwitz in 1942, and Fatima Bédar, a 15-year-old Algerian girl found drowned in Saint-Denis canal after attending the October 17, 1961 protests.

Einaudi’s book is to be credited for playing a leading role in publicizing the massacre and a major role in the conviction of Papon. When Papon was ultimately brought to trial in 1997 for his role in the deportation of Jews from Bordeaux, Einaudi testified against him in 1998 and testified about the contents of *The Battle of Paris* on the witness stand. When Papon sued him for defamation, Einaudi defended himself and was fully cleared. Papon was for his part convicted of crimes against humanity in 1998. (See: “Maurice Papon and the October 1961 massacre of Paris”)

There is, however, one point that must be made regarding the book, as it grapples with the question of how, less than 20 years after the Holocaust, such a fascistic massacre could have been allowed to occur. Einaudi approvingly cites the views of a young supporter of the FLN that “indifference and passivity are guilty.” Indicting the lack of public response to the massacre, Einaudi writes the following on the detention of thousands of Algerians in the Paris Sports Palace:

“At the same time, buses continued going by. People got off, walking by the entry to the Sports Palace. No one reacted, no group formed. ... There were men draped in blood, their heads in their hands, forced to stand for hours in an internment camp and yet life continued all around, as if nothing had happened.”

Indifference to fascistic violence is indeed extremely dangerous, and centuries of colonial violence and political appeals to anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim sentiment, combined with Stalinism’s encouragement of nationalism, have left a profound and ugly mark on French culture. Yet this question of how this massacre came to pass cannot be answered outside the struggle to build a revolutionary leadership in the international working class.

There was deep opposition among workers in Algeria, France and internationally to the violence of the French police-state machine during the Algerian war. This opposition could not be mobilized, however, when mass Stalinist organizations existed in the working class, dedicated to blocking a struggle against the Gaullist regime. It proved impossible for individual workers in downtown Paris in October 1961 to improvise a counteroffensive against the bloody police onslaught and overcome the counterrevolutionary inertia of the PCF-CGT machine.

Under these conditions, with no obvious avenue open for struggle, indifference, pessimism and other backward sentiments could indeed come to the fore, including among layers of workers. Yet in the final analysis, responsibility for this lies not with the working class, but with the Stalinist parties and bureaucracies that helped fund the war in Algeria and blocked a mobilization by the working class against such fascistic violence.

Political lessons of the Algerian war in the struggle against fascistic rule

While Papon was convicted of crimes against humanity in 1998, the far right today enjoys a level of open public support in French and European bourgeois politics unheard of 23 years ago. The PCF and *L'Humanité*, discredited by the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union, deprived of any working-class base, are funded by corporate handouts and state subsidies. Far-right journalist Eric Zemmour, a supporter of the Vichy regime who has threatened to deport Muslims from France, is set to be a top contender in the 2022 presidential elections.

This state of affairs is above all the political responsibility of the descendants of petty-bourgeois renegades from Trotskyism such as the Pabloites and the OCI.

Indeed, in 2002, the year international protests began against the impending US invasion of Iraq, mass protests erupted in France when neo-fascist candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen made it to the second round of the presidential election, facing right-wing incumbent Jacques Chirac. Millions of workers and youth poured into the streets to oppose the presence of Le Pen on the second round and denounce a rotten choice

between Chirac and Le Pen.

The ICFI addressed an Open Letter to the Pabloite Revolutionary Communist League (LCR), the Workers Party (descended from the OCI), and the Lutte ouvrière (Workers Struggle) group, which collectively had received 10 percent of the vote, or over 3 million votes. It advocated an active boycott of the second round—that is, building a movement in the working class to boycott the elections and oppose the policies of the next president. It explained that this was the only way to mobilize the working class independently of the ruling parties against the far-right danger.

Refusing the ICFI’s strategy, the LCR openly endorsed Chirac against Le Pen, a position to which its allies adapted themselves, and worked to tie the working class to Chirac as the supposed savior of France from the danger of fascism.

This position was bound up with a comprehensive repudiation of the political lessons of the 20th century. The Algerian war and the October 17, 1961 massacre unforgettably showed that fascistic violence is not unique to fascist or pro-fascist parties but rooted in the class dynamics of capitalism itself. To defend unsustainable levels of inequality produced by the enrichment of the ruling class, unpopular wars and discredited political systems, the ruling elite invariably turns in eras of mortal crisis to bloody violence by the state machine and its far-right nationalist supporters.

The LCR’s position in 2002 was a signal of its alignment with the state machine that carried out the October 17, 1961 massacre. This implicit acquiescence to imperialist war and police-state violence emerged after the LCR dissolved itself and founded the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA) in 2009, backing the NATO war in Libya in 2011 and the NATO intervention to back a far-right coup in Ukraine in 2014. It allowed the French neo-fascists to posture as the sole opposition to the austerity policies imposed by Chirac and subsequent presidents.

The *Parti de l'égalité socialiste* (PES), the French section of the ICFI founded in 2016, intervened in the 2017 presidential election campaign, again calling for an active boycott of the second round between Macron and neo-fascist candidate Marine Le Pen. It intervened in protests and held public meetings to warn that Macron was no alternative to a fascistic candidate, and to explain to workers and youth the necessity of the independent revolutionary mobilization of the working class.

The perspective advanced by the PES has been utterly vindicated. After the brutal police onslaught against strikes and “yellow vest” protests and Macron’s policy of “living with the virus” during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is clear that powerful forces within the state machine, under Macron’s authority, are preparing a far-right regime.

General Pierre de Villiers issued a barely veiled call last year to prepare a dictatorship against the danger of revolution. “Today, beyond the security crisis, there is the pandemic, all of this against a backdrop of economic, social and political crisis with a lack of confidence in leaders,” he said. “I fear this pent-up anger will explode at once,” he warned. “We must think the unthinkable. ... The rule of law is obviously a good thing, but at some point, we also must develop a strategic plan.”

The “strategic plan” that emerged in the pages of *Current Values* this April, is a far-right coup and the killing of thousands in military repression inside France itself. Macron has for his part maintained a deafening silence on the coup threats made by the de Villiers brothers, allied military officers, and other political descendants of the 1961 Algiers coup plotters.

The PES however is turned to the class struggle and the rapidly growing international movement in the working class. It commemorates the October 17, 1961 massacre by reaffirming its struggle to mobilize the working class against neocolonial wars and fascistic coup threats in France and internationally. It fights to arm the working class with a Trotskyist perspective against the political descendants of both the right-wing forces that waged the October 17, 1961 massacre, and of the anti-Trotskyist parties and bureaucracies that blocked a counteroffensive by the working class.



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