

Police, far-right youth attack student protests amid French elections

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On Thursday evening, French police stormed the Sorbonne University in central Paris. Students inside were forcibly dispersed, and at least one person was seriously injured. As of this writing, there are reports of ongoing police actions targeting protesters at the nearby Panthéon monument.

This is part of a broader crackdown against a wave of university occupations across France that began after the first round of the presidential elections set up a runoff between incumbent right-wing President Emmanuel Macron and neo-fascist candidate Marine Le Pen.

Earlier in the day, a group of students occupied the main building of Sciences Po (the political science university) in Paris. In the afternoon, this group was violently attacked by a group of far-right vigilantes.

At around 8:00 p.m., hundreds of armed police began a full assault on the Sorbonne. Most of the students surrendered or escaped, but around 40 were trapped inside and not allowed to leave for over two hours.

A video posted by one of them on Twitter stated: “We are trapped inside by 200 police and gendarmes, some of us are minors, and one person needs urgent medical care. We are absolutely peaceful and non-violent. We simply wish to leave calmly. We simply protest for the planet and against the rise of far-right ideas. We are within our constitutional right to defend our political opinion. We tried to leave peacefully but the police used force against us.”

The storming of the Sorbonne was carried out by heavily armed units from the Brigade to Repress Violent Action (BRAV). BRAV was a special unit set up by the Paris prefecture amid the “yellow vest” protests. All the streets around the university were surrounded with multiple vehicles from the National Police, the Paris police and the gendarmerie.

Also on Thursday, a group of around 40 students at Sciences Po peacefully occupied the university’s main building. At around 3:00 p.m. this group was assaulted by a vigilante group made up by militants from various neo-fascist student groups. The twitter page of La Cocarde Étudiante, a youth group associated with Marine Le Pen’s National Rally, claimed it led the action.

The group tweeted a video of its thugs assaulting protesters, writing: “Faced with the inaction of the university administration and the State, we have taken matters into our own hands: the blockade of Sciences Po has just been cleared by us.” It also claimed to have carried out the action with Generation Z, the youth movement of fascist candidate Eric Zemmour, and the Inter-university National Union, a right-wing student group linked to the Gaullists.

The Sorbonne had been occupied by students since Wednesday afternoon, in response to the administration’s attempt to shut down a meeting organized to oppose Le Pen and Macron. Throughout Thursday morning, hundreds of police surrounded the university.

The police presence in the Latin Quarter, the area immediately around the Sorbonne in central Paris, increased throughout the morning. By midday, the streets surrounding the Sorbonne were completely cordoned off, and the students inside the university were under siege. Hundreds of police were visible, armed with machine guns, riot shields and full body armor.

Throughout the day, multiple assaults were made on peaceful protesters supporting the occupation. At around 1:30 p.m. hundreds of riot police dispersed a crowd gathered on the Place de la Sorbonne, just adjacent to the university’s main entrance. Protesters

were driven onto the Boulevard Saint-Michel, where after a few minutes they were attacked by another group of riot police striking protesters and passersby with riot shields and batons to clear the road.

At around 6:00 p.m. new crowds simultaneously formed near the Place de la Sorbonne and on the Place de la Panthéon just a few hundred meters away. The meeting at the Panthéon had organized as a rally in defense of refugees, but as it became clear the police were preparing to storm the Sorbonne, hundreds of attendees attempted to march to the Sorbonne to support the occupation.

Both crowds were violently dispersed by heavily armed police using tear gas. Police from the BRAV unit also led this assault on protesters at the Sorbonne where several protesters were beaten by police officers. One video shows a protester pinned down by what appear to be plainclothes officers. Another video shows police charging at a group of protesters.

Two students, Michael and Edgar, who attended the protest at 1:30 in support of the Sorbonne occupation, spoke to the WSWS just after the police had cleared the Place de la Sorbonne.

They both voted for Mélenchon in the first round. When asked if they would vote for Le Pen and Macron, Michael said: “No, never. It is a false choice. I will abstain.” He added, “Le Pen is a fascist and openly racist against Muslims, and we know this. But I also will not vote for Macron, he is a hidden fascist posing as a liberal. He also attacked Muslims and worsened the economy for most people.”

When asked about students’ decision to start an occupation, Michael said, “They wanted to make a change, and they don’t know how.”

Edgar explained the situation that gave rise to the occupation, “There was an assembly general for Sorbonne students yesterday, and the administration then threatened to bring in the police. They threatened to attack students gathering in their own university, so they responded with the occupation.”

Asked about the police actions in clearing the Place de la Sorbonne, Michael said, “Look at what the police are doing. How is this democracy? We want to show our frustration with Macron and Le Pen, and the police just respond with repression. This is France now; it is not democracy, it is repression.”

Michael said that students “wanted to fight back and

to send a message to Macron, Le Pen, and the Police that they oppose their regime. ... We need to spread this occupation. Like students who have occupied Sciences Po in Nancy and at Sciences Po in Paris this morning. We must send a message.”

That both state and far-right vigilante violence is being meted out against peacefully protesting students under a Macron government exposes the lie that the incumbent president is a “lesser evil” compared to the openly neo-fascist Marine Le Pen. Regardless of who comes to power, the French police state will be directed against all youth and workers who oppose the ruling class’ program of austerity, mass infection and war.

This underscores the correctness of the Parti de l’égalité socialiste’s (PES) call to campaign for an active boycott of the presidential elections and to build a movement in the working class rejecting both Macron and Le Pen. The two candidates, and the entire French ruling class can be successfully opposed only by a mass movement of the working class based on an internationalist, socialist and revolutionary perspective.

The PES invites workers, youth and socialist-minded intellectuals to attend its online meeting on Monday, “For a working class boycott of the Macron-Le Pen election.”



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