

Students at Joliot-Curie high school near Paris denounce police attacks

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Last week, WSWs journalists interviewed high school students at the Joliot-Curie high school in Nanterre, a suburb of Paris. For the past two weeks, police have been attacking students at the school, with 18 students arrested and several injured. The statements collected by WSWs reveal that this is a provocation by the police against youth from a working class suburb.

The first protests on October 10 were peaceful, according to the testimonies of all the students. On the 11th, the police surrounded the youth in front of the school and then attacked them with tear gas, tear gas grenades, and batons and arrested fourteen of them. On the 18th, another confrontation resulted in four arrests. When WSWs spoke to the students, one student was still in the hospital.

One student, Sara, explained why the students blocked the school: 'First, students protested against the cancelling of a homework help program which helped a lot (but) was taken away, and they protested for the right to wear clothes that were banned as religious when they are not religious.'

According to Awa, 'The blockades were peaceful, there was no violence. The only thing the students did was put padlocks on the door.'

Sophiane, age 15, had his arm in a sling after being thrown to the ground by the police. He said, 'the police started charging at us. They came, they started gassing us, they dislocated my shoulder. Now I'll be in a splint for at least a month and a half. It is very complicated for me. My family is suffering. There are people, they are traumatized in my class with everything that happened and it's hard for our future.'

Sara confirmed that the police started the violence: 'They started throwing tear gas canisters at us, attacking us'

Awa testified that the police gassed the high school

students, some of whom were hit by the tear gas canisters: 'The gas stings your throat, that, like your eyes. You feel your eyes tear up when you're right next to the gas. Your eyes are all red. You have a hard time breathing all around.'

Awa said police threw stun grenades at the high school students. She also saw police arrest a 15-year-old high school student and several veiled high school girls.

Another student, Noya, said the police violence on October 11 was a provocation prepared by a squad of more than 50 cops who arrived at the school early in the morning: 'They came with shin guards, they had helmets, they had batons, they had guns, they had flash balls ... they had the whole thing.' Awa added that the high school students, on the other hand, had nothing.

Noya emphasized the impact of the violence on the high school students: 'All the students who were put in a lecture hall, a big room. There were some who were in a bad way. They cried and they fainted because of the shock of what had happened to them.'

The police crackdown was so broad that it even affected passers-by in the neighborhood, Awa said: 'You go by where there are kids, there are little ones who were gassed. There was a grandmother who was running because they practically started gassing her.'

According to Awa, 'They searched almost every person they found quote-unquote suspicious, that is, blacks and Arabs. Nobody was armed, nobody had anything.' She then recounted the accounts she had heard of police violence against the detained high school students, 'I was told that they were not fed. I had been hit, it was nonsense. Why do the police hit so hard? Minors? They are hitting people who are not even fifteen years old.'

According to Awa and Noya, since the police assault,

numerous police buses have surrounded the school every morning at 7 a.m. to keep an eye on students entering the establishment.

Students told WSWS that despite the brutal violence directed at the students, the school's administration defends the police action. After the assault, injured and traumatized students were forced to continue with classes as if nothing had occurred.

Despite the police repression, students at Joliot-Curie also joined the wave of blockades and demonstrations on October 18, in solidarity with the interprofessional strike that day. One high school student expressed his opposition to the requisitioning of strikers at the refineries: 'We're just trying to show that we're against it, to show that we can demand our social rights.'

Asked about the reasons for the police assault on Joliot-Curie, Awa said that the high school students 'wanted to be listened to, they made a blockade, and they are young people from the suburbs. The police, as a result, are going to say to themselves 'no, they are dangerous,' immediately, because in France, we have a problem: people who come from the suburbs are automatically type-cast as criminals, as violent people, when this is not at all the case. If you took the time to be in Nanterre, you would see there is a spirit of solidarity between blacks, Arabs, and whites.'

The students also explained that the government's reactionary campaign against 'Islamism' in French schools served to repress them.

Awa said, 'I saw a lot of people in dresses, they weren't Muslims. It's a fabric, it's a garment. It doesn't mean anything. It's silly, in many different cultures you see long dresses, whether it's in India, in Africa, or anywhere. So it's not because someone puts on a long dress that they're necessarily Muslim ... we aren't trying to Islamize the high school.'

She added, 'This is a secular high school. How, technically, could students Islamize a high school? It's not possible.'

Awa and Noya added that on several occasions, high school girls whose dresses were considered too long or too loose had been forced to remove them. According to Sofiane, even baggy t-shirts were considered 'religious signs' by the school administration and therefore banned.

While interviewing students, WSWS reporters witnessed dozens of students leaving the school and

putting back on headwear and loose-fitting dresses that were banned in class. This widely hated rule, which helped spark the protests at Joliot-Curie, is however the law in France.

The students testified to the official brutality that prevails in France as the ruling elite is ever more terrified of rising social anger. Ava explained, 'In France, I say, it works like a dictatorship. Your superiors are all there and literally tell you what to do and you have no say. You have no right to speak and the only way to make yourself heard is by force, because that is how force is used. That's the only way to communicate.'

For young people who oppose Macron's anti-Muslim policies, police violence, austerity against a backdrop of massive inflation, and the escalating war in Ukraine, the social force to mobilize is the working class, in France and internationally. It is only through a massive mobilization of the working class that we can organize society on a socialist basis and solve the burning problems facing young people.



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