

French police and state machine overtaken by protests in provincial cities on October 17

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Saturday saw the largest mobilisation against the Macron government since the struggle against the 2023 pension reform. In an explosive social context marked by rising fuel prices, austerity and the militarisation of the French economy, the youth blockading the high schools and workers from the 2018 yellow vest movement mobilised in large numbers in the regions.

The October revolt of high school students has revived the spectre of a May 1968 general strike, which the government is seeking to crush through ferocious police repression and the arrest of high school students by the thousands. The atmosphere of the mobilisations was particularly tense for the police and the government, which had underestimated the strength of the mobilisation. They were repeatedly overwhelmed by the demonstrators.

In Marseille, the demonstration scheduled for 2 p.m. at the Vieux-Port on Saturday, October 17, finally took place an hour later at the Réformés, in a festive atmosphere, in support of the high school movement and to express people's anger at the high cost of living.

At the bottom of the rue de la République, Pierre, a yellow vest and a retiree from Bandol, told the newspaper *La Provence*: "We were hoping to be able to express ourselves, but they did everything to steal the demonstration from us. I've been gassed five times since this morning, and now the police have brought out their Centaure armoured vehicle... They are declaring war on the people."

Demonstrators chanting "It's the Revolution, we're taking the Bastille" entered Marseille city hall before being driven out by the CRS riot police. Violent clashes continued throughout the day between young demonstrators and the police.

Benoît Payan, the Socialist Party (PS) mayor of Marseille, issued hysterical calls for repression: "The

demonstrators are not rioters. The rioters, on the other hand, I want them in prison, actually. I want them brought to justice. I want to know how many have been arrested, I want to know what is going on."

In Avignon, after a peaceful mobilisation throughout the morning, marked by solidarity between high school students, university students, trade unions and retirees, the afternoon took a different turn. Around 2:30 p.m., at the prefecture, when everyone seemed to have dispersed, the first clashes broke out between police and demonstrators. For nearly an hour, the two sides confronted each other with tear gas, stones and fireworks, while demonstrators booed. The crowd finally dispersed and went back to demonstrate on the square in front of the Palais des Papes.

After initial blockades in the Gironde on Saturday morning, the demonstration began at the Place de la Bourse in Bordeaux at 2p.m., where 7,000 people gathered according to the prefecture and 100,000 according to the CGT. Shortly after 2p.m., the police tried in vain to clear the Place de la Bourse with tear gas. At the same time, demonstrators damaged the façade of the Bordeaux Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

The RAID elite police unit was called in after the residence of the police prefect Sophie Brocas was ransacked.

The evening was marked by fires in rubbish bins and electric bicycles, barricades and the looting of shops. "The perpetrators directly targeted the institutions of the Republic and the authority of the State. I firmly condemn the damage and violence," wrote Bordeaux mayor Thomas Cazenave in a statement.

Limoges city hall was set on fire, and the 19th-century building is "largely lost." The mayor of Limoges responded: "You haven't destroyed all the

cameras in the city, you passed under them. I am going to file complaints everywhere and I am going to go after what is hiding behind the internet accounts.”

As the demonstration on Saturday, October 17, was expected to draw tens of thousands of people, the City of Toulouse (Haute-Garonne) asked residents not to put out their rubbish bins, hoping to prevent fires. Clashes took place between the police and 200 demonstrators who had positioned themselves in front of the head of the march in Saint-Cyprien shortly before 4p.m., after crossing the Pont des Catalans. The CGT denounced an “attack on the trade union lead contingent” by the police.

Shops were targeted, with the rue d’Alsace-Lorraine and the rue Saint-Rome, the main shopping streets in the city centre, particularly hit. CRS riot police blocked demonstrators trying to approach city hall on the Place du Capitole.

In Lyon, where 20,000 people reportedly demonstrated according to government figures, the tourist office was set on fire while several thousand demonstrators were present.



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