

France: widening anti-police riots provoke government crisis

By Antoine Lerougetel
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Nightly riots and clashes in the Paris suburbs, between the police and youth mainly of North African and African descent, are entering their second week. A thousand police officers were deployed Wednesday night in Seine-Saint-Denis, northwest of Paris, and half of the department's 40 towns were affected by violence. Shots have been fired at police officers, and one official spokesman described events as a descent into civil war.

The conflicts have provoked a severe crisis for the French government. Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin has cancelled a scheduled visit to Canada, and Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy has pulled out of a visit to Afghanistan and Pakistan. Emergency meetings of the government of de Villepin and President Jacques Chirac have been held to discuss the situation.

The rioting began on the evening of October 27 after two youth were electrocuted when they climbed onto an electrical transformer while fleeing from the police. The deaths of the boys, in the northern suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois, sparked confrontations between youth and 400 to 500 riot police dispatched by Sarkozy. Violent protests and clashes with armed riot police have continued every night since and have spread to other working class suburbs.

The eruptions are the product of desperate poverty, mass unemployment and a vicious, openly racist law-and-order campaign spearheaded by Sarkozy, who has been considered the main rival to Chirac within the Gaullist Union for a Popular Party (UMP) and the leading contender to replace him in the next presidential election. Sarkozy has sent armed police into the immigrant slums and used terms such as "scum" and "gangrene" to describe their inhabitants.

On Wednesday, a council of ministers meeting was held, as well as a meeting of Gaullist deputies to the National Assembly. A question session was held in the National Assembly, at which Socialist Party and Communist Party deputies criticised Sarkozy, who sat mute. The deputies blamed him for instigating a social explosion through his law-and-order policies and provocative statements. De Villepin answered for him, trying to present a united government front. However, it was widely reported that deputies at the closed Gaullist meeting had heatedly attacked Sarkozy.

At the council of ministers, Chirac asked for a plan for urban renovation to be accelerated. He relieved Sarkozy of his responsibility for the preparation of the plan to prevent delinquency and entrusted it to de Villepin, who thereupon announced that he would be working for "equal opportunities" and "a plan of action" for youth employment in Seine-Saint-Denis, the department where Clichy and many other such communities are concentrated and the scene of a dozen outbreaks since October 27. De Villepin is Sarkozy's most likely rival for the presidency in 2007.

The provocative language used by Sarkozy against the youth on suburban housing estates has been part of his attempt to mobilise a right-wing and racist movement under his leadership and that of the UMP. He hoped that this would not only secure his succession as president, but also provide popular support for the attacks on the working class required to break its resistance to the destruction of the welfare state and labour rights.

Since the beginning of the present government's term of office in 2002, Sarkozy has led a drive to diminish the rights of defendants and extend police powers. He set up special brigades of police to send into troubled estates.

This has gone hand in hand with media campaigns demonising the immigrant youth and whipping up anti-Muslim sentiment, at the centre of which was legislation outlawing the wearing of the Muslim headscarf in state schools—a measure passed in 2004 with the support of virtually the entire political establishment, including the Socialist Party.

More than 20 years of austerity policies and accelerating attacks on workers' living standards and rights by successive governments—those headed by the official “left” parties as well as those of the right wing—have stretched social tensions to the breaking point.

The chronic national 10 percent unemployment rate rises to well over 50 percent on many Parisian estates. The Gaullist government's policy of encouraging job insecurity and short-term work contracts has been made more unbearable by savage cuts in benefits for the unemployed. Rises in gas and petrol prices have further increased the economic pressure on these communities.

The mass reaction on the night of the tragedy on the Chêne-Pointu estate has spilled over into many other estates in the Paris suburbs, in recent days involving small groups of youth burning vehicles and rubbish bins, attacking firemen attempting to extinguish the fires, and constantly clashing with the police.

The government fears that the Paris riots could spark broader upheavals all over France. Not only the towns in the Seine-Saint-Denis department have been affected, but also estates in the Val d'Oise and the Yvelines departments of greater Paris.

Tensions were heightened still further when a tear gas canister was fired into a mosque on October 31. The following night, 1,250 cars were reported burned and at least one primary school was trashed.

Already, the Ousse des Bois estate in Pau, a thousand kilometres away near the Spanish border, has seen three continuous nights of clashes between youth and the police.

Despite the concern expressed within ruling circles, there is unanimity on the need for ever-greater repression to deal with the unrest. Minister for Social Cohesion Jean-Louis Borloo said the government had to react “firmly,” while UMP deputy Jacques Myard complained that the government had been weak because it had “accepted, step-by-step, that every night youths burn cars, destroy business and so on. Those guys will use the pretext of everything to riot, to demonstrate, to destroy.”

While making a show of criticising Sarkozy's excesses and calling for the beefing up of social services cut by the government, all of the currents of the Socialist Party, the Greens and the Communist Party have called for the police to suppress the rioting.

Dominique Strauss Khan of the Socialist Party, a former minister in Lionel Jospin's Plural Left government (1997-2002) and contender for the party's nomination for the 2007 presidential election, stated on Europe 1 radio, “I utterly condemn the incidents at Clichy-sous-Bois. When it comes to law and order, an extremely firm attitude is required...repression and prevention should be employed.”

The Socialist Party and the Communist Party have presided over many of these municipalities for decades and maintained the peace for the French ruling class, while conditions have eroded. They are complicit in the austerity policies and the police build-up that underlie the explosion of anger among oppressed and impoverished youth that is now shaking France.