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Riots in the French suburbs: In the face of despair, only the class struggle offers a future

More than 6,000 vehicles burned: private cars, buses, fire-trucks; dozens of buildings torched: shops, warehouses, workshops, gyms, schools, creches; more than a thousand arrests and already more than a hundred prison sentences passed; several hundred injured - rioters, but also policemen and several dozen fire-fighters; shots fired at the police. Each night since 27 October, hundreds of districts in all regions of the country have been affected. Districts and neighbourhoods which are among the poorest in the land, where, crammed into sinister tower-blocks, live millions of workers and their families, the great majority of them from North Africa and black Africa.

The violence of desperation

What is most striking about these actions, apart from the extent of the damage and violence, is their total absurdity. It's easy to understand why the youth of the most deprived neighbourhoods, especially those from immigrant families, should want to confront the police. Day by day they have been subjected to crude and intrusive identity controls and body searches, accompanied by racist insults; it's perfectly logical for them to see the cops as their persecutors. But here the main victims of their violence are their own families or those close to them: younger brothers and sisters who can't go to their usual school, parents who have lost cars, for which they will get pathetic insurance pay-outs because the cars are old and cheap, and who will now have to shop away from where they live because the nearer and cheaper shops have been burned out. The young people were not smashing up the rich neighbourhoods inhabited by their exploiters, but their own grim suburbs, which will now be all the more uninhabitable than before. In the same way, the injuries inflicted on the fire-fighters, people whose job is to protect others, often at risk to their own lives, are truly shocking, as are the injuries inflicted on the passengers of a bus which was set on fire, or the death of a man of sixty struck by a young man, apparently for trying to stop him from committing some act of violence.

In this sense the depredations committed in the poor neighbourhoods night after night have nothing whatever to do with the struggle of the working class. Certainly, in its struggle against capitalism, the working class is obliged to use violence. The overthrow of capitalism is necessarily a violent act because the ruling class, with all the means of repression it has at its disposal, will defend tooth and nail its power and its privileges. History has taught us, especially since the Paris Commune of 1871 among many other examples, the extent to which the bourgeoisie is prepared to wipe its feet on its grand principles of 'democracy', of 'freedom, equality and fraternity' when it feels threatened. In one single, bloody week 30,000 Parisian workers were massacred because they had tried to take power into their own hands. And even in the defence of its immediate interests, the working class is often faced with repression by the bourgeois state or the bosses' private armies - repression which it has to oppose through its own class violence.

But what's happening now in France has nothing to do with proletarian violence against the exploiting class: the main victims of the current violence are the workers themselves. Apart from those who are suffering most directly from the damage that has been done, the whole working class of the country is affected: the media barrage around the present events is covering up all the attacks which at this very moment the bourgeoisie is unleashing, while at the same time obscuring the struggles which workers have been trying to wage against these attacks.

The response of the ruling class

As for the capitalists and the leaders of the state, sitting calmly in their posh neighbourhoods, they are taking advantage of the current violence to justify the strengthening of the apparatus of repression. Thus the main measure taken by the French government to deal with the situation has been to decree, on 8 November, a state of emergency, a measure last adopted 43 years ago and which is based on a law passed over 50 years ago, during the Algerian war. The major element in this decree is a curfew, a ban on going out onto the street after a certain hour, as during the days of the German occupation between 1940 and 1944 or during the state of siege imposed in Poland in 1981. But the decree also permits other inroads into classical 'democracy', such as house raids by day or night, control of the media or the use of military tribunals. The politicians who decided to impose the state of emergency or who support it (like the Socialist Party) assure us that these are exceptional measures and that they won't be abused, but it is a precedent which it is getting the population - and in particular the workers - to accept. Tomorrow, faced with the workers' struggles which the attacks of capital are bound to engender, it will be easier to resort to similar measures and to make the weapons of bourgeois repression seem more acceptable.

The present situation can bring nothing good either to the young people burning cars, or to the working class as a whole. Only the bourgeoisie can, to a certain degree, draw profit from it for the future.

This doesn't mean that the ruling class has deliberately provoked the current violence.

It's true that certain of its political sectors, like the extreme right National Front, can expect to reap electoral gains from the events. It's also true that Sarkozy, who dreams of winning votes from the extreme right during the next presidential elections, threw oil on the fire by talking about using fire-hoses to 'clean out' the rebellious neighbourhoods and by describing the rioters as 'rabble' when the violence first began. But it is also clear that the main sectors of the ruling class, beginning with the government, but including the left parties who, in general, run the most affected municipalities, are highly embarrassed by the situation. This embarrassment is motivated in part by the economic cost of the violence. Thus the boss of French bosses, Laurence Parisot, declared on Radio Europe on 7 November that "*the situation is grave, even very grave*" and that "*the consequences for the economy are very serious*".

But above all the bourgeoisie is embarrassed and anxious on the political level. The difficulty it is having in 'restoring order' is undermining the credibility of the institutions of its rule. Even if the working class cannot draw any benefit from the present situation, its class enemy, the bourgeoisie, is also finding it increasingly difficult to maintain the 'republican order' it needs to justify its place at the head of society.

And this disquiet isn't only being felt by the French bourgeoisie. In other countries, in Europe but also right across the world, as in China for example, the situation in France is front page news. Even in the USA, a country where in general the press has little to say about what goes on in France, images of cars and buildings in flames have hit the headlines.

For the US bourgeoisie, displaying the crisis hitting the poor neighbourhoods of French towns lets them settle a few scores: the French media and politicians made a huge noise about the failure of the American state to cope with Hurricane Katrina. Today, there is a certain jubilation in the US press or among certain of its leaders, who have taken the opportunity to mock the 'arrogance of France'. This friendly

exchange is par for the course between two countries which are in permanent opposition on the diplomatic front, especially over Iraq. This said, there is real anxiety in the tone of the European press, even if it has flicked a few barbs at the 'French social model', which Chirac has so often boasted about as against the 'Anglo-Saxon model'. Thus, on 5 November, the Spanish daily *La Vanguardia* wrote that "no one is rubbing their hands; the autumn storms in France could be the prelude to a European winter". And it was the same for the political leaders: "The images coming from Paris are a warning to all democracies that the efforts towards integration can never be considered as finished. On the contrary we must give them a new impetus... The situation here is not comparable, but it is clear that one of the tasks of the next government will be to accelerate integration" (Thomas Steg, a German government spokesman, 7 November). "We cannot think that we are so different from Paris here, it's only a question of time" (Romano Prodi, leader of the centre left in Italy, and former president of the European Commission). "Everyone is anxious about what is happening" (Tony Blair).

This anxiety reveals that the ruling class is becoming aware of its own bankruptcy. Even in countries where there has been a somewhat different approach to the problems of immigration, the bourgeoisie is still faced with difficulties it can't overcome, because they derive from an insurmountable economic crisis which has been facing it for the last 30 years or more.

Today the 'good guys' of the French bourgeoisie, and even the government which up till now has resorted to the stick rather than the carrot, declares that 'something must be done' for the deprived neighbourhoods. They are talking about renovating the miserable suburbs inhabited by those now in revolt. They are calling for more social workers, more cultural, sports or leisure centres where young people can occupy themselves in activities other than burning cars. All the politicians agree that one of the causes of the current malaise among the young is the high level of unemployment they suffer from: it's over 50% in these areas. The right is saying that it needs to be easier for companies to install themselves in these areas, notably through a reduction in taxes; the left calls for more teachers and better schools. But neither of these policies can resolve the problem.

The underlying causes of the revolt

Unemployment won't go down because a factory is set up in one area rather than another. The need for education workers or social workers to deal with the hundreds of thousands of desperate young people is such that the state budget isn't up to it. It's the same in all countries where the state is obliged to reduce 'social' expenditure in order to boost the ability of the national economy to compete on a saturated world market. And even if there were lots more social workers or teachers, that wouldn't solve the fundamental contradictions which weigh down on capitalist society and which are the true source of the alienation affecting young people.

If the young of the suburbs are rebelling by using totally absurd methods today, it's because they are sunk in a profound despair. In April 1981, in Brixton, a poor area of London with a large immigrant population, the young people who had rebelled in a similar way daubed the walls with the slogan 'No Future'. It's this feeling of 'No Future' which hundreds of thousands of young people are feeling today in France, as in many other countries. They feel it in their guts, every day, because of unemployment, because of the discrimination and disdain with which they are treated. But they are not alone. In many parts of the world the situation is even worse and the response of young people takes on even more absurd forms: in Palestine, the dream of many children is to be 'martyrs' and one of the favourite games of 10 year old kids is to strap on a toy suicide bomber's belt.

But these more extreme examples are only the tip of the iceberg. It's not only the poorest young people who are being invaded by despair. Their despair and their absurd actions reveal a total lack of perspective not only for themselves, but for the whole of society, in all countries. A society which, more and more, is stuck in an economic crisis which can't be solved because the contradictions of the capitalist mode of production are themselves insoluble. A society which, more and more, is ravaged by wars, famines, uncontrollable epidemics, by a dramatic deterioration of the environment, by natural catastrophes which are transformed into vast human tragedies, like last winter's tsunami or the flooding of New Orleans at the end of the summer.

In the 1930s, world capitalism went through a crisis comparable to today's. Capitalism's only response was world war. It was a barbaric response but it did allow the bourgeoisie to mobilise society around this objective. Today, the only response of the ruling class to the impasse in its economy is once again war: this is why we are seeing one war after another, wars that increasingly involve the most advanced countries, countries which have been spared from the direct impact of war for a very long time (like the USA or even certain European countries, like Yugoslavia throughout the 90s). However, the bourgeoisie cannot go all the way towards a world war. In the first place because when the first effects of the crisis made themselves felt, at the end of the 60s, the world working class, especially in the most industrialised countries, reacted with such vigour (general strike in France May 68, 'hot autumn' in Italy 69, Poland in 70-71 etc) that it showed that this time round it was not ready to serve as cannon fodder for the imperialist ambitions of the bourgeoisie. In the second place, because with the disappearance of the two great imperialist blocs that followed the collapse of the eastern bloc in 1989, the diplomatic and military conditions for a new world war do not exist today, even if this doesn't prevent more localised wars from continuing and multiplying.

The only perspective: the struggle of the proletariat

Capitalism has no perspective to offer humanity, except increasingly barbaric wars, ever-greater catastrophes, more and more poverty for the great majority of the world population. The only possibility for society to emerge from the barbarism of the present world is the overthrow of the capitalist system. And the only force capable of overthrowing capitalism is the world working class. It's because, up till now, the working class has not had the strength to affirm this perspective through the development and extension of its struggles, that so many of its children are plunging into despair, expressing their revolt in absurd ways or taking refuge in the mirages of religion, which promises them a paradise after they are dead. The only real solution to the 'crisis of the disinherited neighbourhoods' is the development of the proletarian struggle towards the revolution. It is this struggle alone which can give a meaning and a perspective to the whole revolt of the younger generation.

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