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May Day 2017 in Paris: A Report from the Streets

The Story behind the Clashes

CrimethInc.

May 4, 2017

On May Day 2017, massive demonstrations against capitalism and state violence took place in Paris, France. Afterwards, sensationalistic footage circulated around the world of police being attacked with Molotov cocktails. Yet these video clips do not show the larger context. They do not show the intensifying police repression of French society as a whole, nor the police attacks that provoked such desperate acts of self-defense. In this report from France, our Parisian correspondents describe the events of the day and offer more background on the clashes.

The anarchist march departed from the Place des Fêtes for the Place de la République to join the May Day demonstration. We arrived at Place de la République unhindered and assumed our place in the *Cortège de tête*, the combative group that has marched at the front of demonstrations since the movement against the labor law (the *Loi Travail*) in 2016.)

We were expecting the police to employ the same strategy they had used in response to many demonstrations over the past year: to cut the demonstration in two, separating the head

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from the body, in order to isolate the autonomous bloc from other demonstrators. The police employed this strategy on May Day 2016, but in the trap they created, they caught a considerable number of “ordinary demonstrators”—families, elderly people, and children. This provoked indignation from others in the demonstration and created hostility towards the police from demonstrators who had not previously expressed any objection to them.

This occurred because last year, the techniques of the police failed. The demonstrations during the movement against the labor law, especially those of June 14, 2016, prompted a revision of the police strategy, with the collaboration of the security service of the CGT, the majority trade union: the syndicate’s security service, armed with helmets and sticks, pushes the autonomous procession before it into the hands of the police, so that the police can easily kettle the black bloc. Obviously, this is to allow the CGT and the police to enforce a distinction between good and bad protesters: between those who willingly walk around inside a cage comprised of riot police and protest marshalls on one side, and the evil vandals on the other.

But this year, there was another objective, an unavowable one: this time, the goal was above all to hide the police violence that was in store so that it would not be visible to the main body of the demonstration, for no one could witness so much violence without horror. According to many participants, May Day 2017 saw the most violence from the police in a very long time. The police applied it methodically, gradually using more and more serious weapons.

First, after having kettled the autonomous bloc, the police used tear gas attacks to push us onto Boulevard Beaumarchais to keep us out of sight. When that was accomplished, they started to use flash-balls and sting-balls, while shooting tear gas continuously. It was a veritable avalanche, a ceaseless barrage.

plaining that he is too disappointed that France cannot manage itself like a start-up.”

One of his friends did him better:

“What interests Macron is winning. Once he has the job, he’ll find that being president sucks too much. As opposed to the other candidates, he is absolutely post-ideological; he is the most naked incarnation of power. He is empty like logistics are empty. He is going to get traumatized and he won’t handle the shock.”

When we asked them if they didn’t fear they were doing the work of the Front National in opposing themselves to the Republican candidate, their response was frank and unanimous:

“Yes, it’s true that there is this risk. But if Le Pen gets in, we’ll fuck everything up to make up for it. That’s a promise.”

its steps while screaming with one voice, “Libérez la CGT!” Surprised by the confusion that they themselves had produced, the cops began to throw sound grenades into the crowd and to flood the street with tear gas. This practical disagreement over how the day went will later produce many hours of debate. On the one side, the demonstrators who refuse to see the unions marginalized; on the other, an intransigent prefecture (that is, local government) that tries really hard to break through the street with flash-bang grenades and clouds of tear gas.

Arriving at the Place de la Bastille, and in spite of great pyrotechnic efforts, a large part of the procession was forced to flee the gas, leaving the trade unionists ever more isolated. Caught in a vise on avenue Daumesnil, several hundred participants were literally choked, then lynched, by dozens of rabid policemen. Our reporters noted unprecedented, unrestrained usage of “less-lethal” weapons. And no surprise when they saw that the cops had upped the ante to undertake a charge onto the greenbelt where some had thought they’d be able to flee the density of the gas! But this will not be enough to spoil the atmosphere. After long minutes of suspense and coughing, the entire demonstration was able to resume its activities, thereby demonstrating to the prefect the full superficiality of his armed intimidations.

Let’s note that, like during all the mobilizations against the *Loi travail*, the walls were decorated with some very inspired graffiti. “Drunk, he votes in 2017.” “Run, comrade, the world of the old is behind you.” “We aren’t here to sell flowers.” “Macron: first warning.” “Macron : destitution!” “Macron you’re done.” “There were no presidential elections.”

Intrigued by this rage against a president that hadn’t even been elected yet, we asked a young tagger what he meant by his inscription: “Macron will weep. Signed, the youth.”

“If elected, Macron will not finish his term. In two years, he will be resigning on the TV news with a tear in the eye, ex-

In response, some people threw stones. Fireworks too. Some Molotov cocktails. The police pushed us relentlessly towards the Place de la Bastille, shooting at us without pause. Once there, they formed a trap at the foot of the steps of the Opera Bastille with perhaps two hundred people inside it. For those people, it turned into a scene of tragedy worthy of *The Battleship Potemkin*. The police pushed people on the steps while soaking them in tear gas. We could see nothing, there was no place to escape, people crashed against the steps, jostling and falling on top of each other like in the Odessa Steps Sequence.

Fortunately, we were not in this group. The police pushed us onto Avenue Daumesnil, then Boulevard Diderot.

Picture yourself in this scene. Tear gas grenades are exploding incessantly. Sometimes you think you can escape by a street, so you run there—in any case, you have no choice, because you need to breathe—but the police are waiting for you on every street. As soon as you pass the street corner, they kettle you in, shooting concussion grenades into the middle of the crowd, knowing perfectly well that there is no space to avoid them.

Dozens of people were injured in situations like this. One of our friends got fragments of sting-balls stuck between her bag and her back, burning the bag completely and leaving deep marks on her skin.

We formed circles to let those dressed in black change clothes out of sight of the cameras of the police. The police began to let us go, one by one, inflicting random blows as we did.

Our friend who had been injured was very afraid at this moment, not because of her injuries, but on account of a bureaucratic issue: because she was not French, she had every reason to fear that an arrest would mean expulsion from France.

Those who fear the election of Marine Le Pen must understand that the French police are already carrying out an effectively fascist program. Not only do the majority of police-

men admit to voting for the extreme right, but the state is already employing them to implement totalitarian conditions. Migrants and refugees can tell a lot about this.

In this two-week interval between the two rounds of the election, it is becoming clear that the real seizure of power is not taking place through the election, but at its borders, more or less concealed, in the increasing autonomy of the police force. In our last report, we explored the ways that extending the state of emergency has both paved the way for the police state and rendered it invisible. Since the arrival of Le Pen in the second round of the elections, we see the police behaving as if she had already won the election.

The evening of the first vote was the occasion of an anarchist-organized call to gather at the Place de la Bastille for a “Night of Barricades.” Dozens of people were wounded by police that evening, humiliated, undressed in the street. Journalists were beaten up with their own cameras.

Two days later, statutory refugees (who are officially supposed to benefit from “state protection”) were expelled from their homes and thrown into the streets by police, for no reason, out of pure racism. The next day, a friend’s squat was attacked by the police. Our comrades were tackled to the ground with a flash-ball on the temple. One of our friends was subjected to sexual assault in the car that took her to the police station. Coincidence or not, a few days prior, that squat had hosted a projection of videos we have made in Paris over the past few months documenting police violence against migrants.

All this is further evidence, should more evidence be necessary, that fighting against the extreme right means fighting against the State. It is something we must make a daily practice.

Appendix: Additional Perspectives

In response to a request for additional perspectives on May Day in Paris, we have translated the following review of the day from the French site lundimatin, which also published a helpful analysis of police and media discourse about the events.

Seated on a café terrace, Jacques, a retiree from La Poste, exclaims, “I believe I’ve never experienced such a beautiful May Day demonstration.” It is true that yesterday in Paris, the mood was bright. Yet there was nothing to indicate such a widespread euphoria, Météo France having predicted rain in the afternoon and the sullen mood of the period between election rounds having dispersed the unions’ mobilization.

As always, the battle of numbers raged. In its live monitoring of the events, the Paris police counted 150 people at the head of the procession, while the organizers announced 5000. By the estimations of our reporters at the scene, 1500 to 3000 demonstrators led the festivities amid songs, banners, and fireworks.

As an older woman was walking into the lobby of her home, she seized a young man with his face covered in a purple scarf: “But all of you are demonstrating against what exactly?” The answer is quick: “Oh you know, ma’am, against it all and against nothing.” Maybe the reply seems a little evasive, but it expresses perfectly the multiplicity and the interlacing of what is getting said in the street: against Macron and Le Pen, against work, against elections, indeed against the void. In a way, this colorful mob seems to have gone beyond the place of making demands, to have become, in itself, a pure affirmation.

If the rain had not come to disturb the afternoon, an audacious boldness on the part of the Compagnies républicaines de sécurité (CRS, the riot cops) could have cast a chill. Once the demonstration arrived at the Place de la Bastille, many dozens of armed agents, helmeted and some wearing balaclavas, undertook to net the head held by the CGT. Taken aback by the somewhat cavalier move, the head of the demo had to retrace