

Oppose the state of emergency in France!

the WSWs Editorial Board
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The *World Socialist Web Site* opposes and denounces the imposition of a state of emergency in France by the Chirac-Villepin-Sarkozy government. The introduction of this anti-democratic measure, a green light to the CRS riot police and other repressive agencies to launch a full-scale assault on the youth, is a major attack on democratic rights and a threat to the entire French working class. It is not accidental that the use of the law was first publicly broached by Marine Le Pen, daughter and co-thinker of Jean Marie Le Pen, the leader of the neo-fascist National Front.

We call on the French working class and the genuinely left-wing elements in the population, for whom the defense of democratic rights and the fight for social equality still has meaning, to come to the defense of the impoverished youth and offer a political perspective in the struggle with sclerotic French capitalism.

The events in the working class suburbs of Paris and hundreds of other towns and cities have their tragic and desperate element, but the blame for the violence lies entirely with the French political establishment, including its “left” and “far left” wings, who are essentially satisfied with the status quo and uninterested in the fate of the working class youth, condemned to bleak lives in wretched surroundings.

The state of emergency announced November 8, along with the call-up of police reservists, authorizes local governments to impose curfews and permits police to conduct raids and searches without warrants. The emergency decree, made possible by a 1955 law, will be in effect for 12 days, but the National Assembly can pass a law extending it, “if necessary.” The curfew was scheduled to take effect at midnight Tuesday in areas yet to be determined. Disobedience could result in a sentence of up to two months in prison, a fine of 3,750 euros, or both.

Under the decree, local officials have the power to place people under house arrest and demand that weapons be handed over. Public spaces can be closed down. The law gives the government the power to restrict freedom of the press and freedom of assembly and to shut down theaters.

The state-run radio station France Inter reported November 8 that no restrictions would be applied to the press and the theater, but a government spokesman refused to confirm this.

The mass general strike of 1968 did not precipitate such a state of emergency. The 1955 law is most associated, and

certainly in the minds of the older generation of North African descent, with the violence and torture perpetrated by the French state on the Algerian population and Algerian immigrants in France in the 1950s and 1960s.

On October 17, 1961, for instance, during a mass protest in Paris against a similar emergency curfew, police massacred at least 50 and perhaps as many as 200 Algerian immigrants, beating some of them to death in the courtyard of police headquarters and throwing others, wounded, into the Seine.

Announcing the details of the measure in a crowded National Assembly Tuesday, Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin declared that the “restoration of order is a prerequisite ... We face determined individuals, structured gangs, organized criminality, which will not shrink from any means of making disorder and violence reign.”

“The Republic is at a moment of truth ... the violence must stop,” Villepin told the French parliament, adding that the government took “these events as a warning and as an appeal.”

Some 1,500 police reservists will be brought in to back up the 8,000 already in the working class suburban areas hit by the violence. Asked by a television interviewer about the mobilization of the French army in the country’s urban areas, Villepin replied, “We are not at that point ... [but] at each step we will take the necessary measures to re-establish order very quickly throughout France.”

After the decision to impose a state of emergency, Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy, whose racist and inflammatory comments helped ignite the violence, ominously declared, “We will now be able to act in a preventative manner to avoid these incidents. We will monitor, bit by bit, the evolution of events.” It would appear that Sarkozy has mass, “preventative” detentions in mind.

Villepin also announced in the National Assembly some token measures aimed at the chronic levels of unemployment and social misery in the afflicted neighborhoods, including restoring money cut by his right-wing predecessor, Jean-Pierre Raffarin. Joblessness reaches as high as 40 percent among the youth in the suburbs.

In the social eruption, which began October 27 after two suburban youth were electrocuted fleeing police, some 6,000 cars have been burned, and 1,200 people arrested, many of them teenagers. Eighty-four public buildings have been burned down. A 61-year-old man died Monday from injuries allegedly

sustained after he was attacked while trying to put out a fire in a trash bin. The unrest has spread from Paris to Lyon, Toulouse, Marseille and beyond. Overnight Monday youth burned cars in some 226 French cities, down from 274 the night before.

According to a national police spokesman, youth in the southern city of Toulouse ordered passengers off a bus, then set it on fire and pelted police with gasoline bombs and rocks. Another bus was set on fire in the Paris suburb of Stains. In Sevran, a junior high school was set on fire. A hospital was attacked in the suburb of Vitry-sur-Seine, police say, and rioters attacked a police station in Chenove, in Burgundy. Sebastian Roche, a director of research at the state-funded National Center for Scientific Research, told the media that never had so many French cities been struck by rioting simultaneously.

The media is silent on what the riot police are doing in the neighborhoods, but the track record of the CRS would suggest that any youth who falls into its hands can expect brutal treatment. Those arrested are receiving “fast-track” trials, which human rights advocates have criticized. The Associated Press notes that at one court in the northeastern Paris suburb of Bobigny, 60 riot-related cases were processed in one day and three extra magistrates were called in “to deal with the overflow.” Fifty-two adults and 23 minors have been sentenced to prison or detention centers.

Michel Gaudin, chief of France’s national police, told reporters Tuesday that the “intensity of the violence is falling and the number of attacks against public buildings is going down in terms of the damage. Things are quieting less in the provinces than in Paris, with big cities which remain violent including Toulouse, Lyon and Saint-Etienne.”

The euro fell to a two-year low against the dollar after reports of violence in Brussels and Berlin.

Villepin’s announcement of the state of emergency prompted a nervous response from the left-of-center *Le Monde*, which editorialized Tuesday that to “exhume a law from 1955 sends to the youth from the suburbs a message of astonishing brutality: that France, from a distance of 50 years, intends to treat them like their grandparents.”

Libération, another left-of-center daily newspaper, called the imposition of a state of emergency a “tragic farce.” The paper agreed that the first priority was to “re-establish the authority of the state,” but not at any cost.

The League of Human Rights called the imposition of the emergency decree “catastrophic.” The organization asserted, “This is a social crisis, not a war.”

The response of the official left parties to Villepin’s announcement was predictable. The Socialist Party (PS), which is culpable along with the Gaullist and other right-wing parties for the deplorable conditions in working class areas, blustered about the “heavy responsibility” of the government, especially interior minister Sarkozy, for the unleashing of the violence. In

his next breath, the PS spokesman, Jean-Marc Ayrault, stated “We are not hostile in principle to the curfew.” Ayrault declared meaninglessly, “The state of emergency is first of all a state of social emergency.”

The Communist Party (PCF) opposed the curfew imposition, complaining that the government had dug up a 50-year-old law “as though we were at war.” The Stalinists proposed revisiting the budget instead. PCF leader Marie-George Buffet warned the government that the decree might incite the youth: “It could be taken anew as a sort of challenge to carry out more violence.” The Greens also opposed the emergency measures on the grounds that “we are not in civil war.”

The Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire called the measure “intolerable.” Olivier Besancenot, LCR spokesman, appealed to “all the left and democratic organizations to organize demonstrations together.” In a statement published on the *Rouge* web site, the LCR leadership lectures the youth that while their anger “is comprehensible, they are barking up the wrong tree when they burn residents’ cars, schools, gymnasiums or nurseries.”

The lack of political perspective of the youth can be laid at the feet of the so-called “far left” parties, including Lutte Ouvrière, whose preoccupation lies entirely with ingratiating themselves with various factions of the Socialist Party, Communist Party and trade union bureaucracy. They too have betrayed and abandoned the poorest sections of the youth.

As Villepin announced the state of emergency, a new poll indicated that three out of four French adults disapproved of his handling of the crisis. The survey, taken over the weekend by the LH2 institute, found that 71 percent of those questioned believed the government’s response to the upheavals “went in the wrong direction.”

The poll did not indicate from which point of view the government was being criticized, for being too harsh or too lenient with the angry youth, but a Paris street market vendor interviewed by the *Washington Post* was probably not unique in his opinion. Michel Narbonne, 59, told the *Post*, “It’s no wonder these kids are protesting when their future looks like a dead end. They are frustrated, like the majority of French people. These kids are doing what most French people have wanted to do for the past 10 years.”

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