

Adama Traoré's autopsy undermines French police's account of his death

By Kumaran Ira
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On Saturday, nearly 600 people gathered before Gare du Nord in Paris demanding the “truth” about the circumstances of the death of 24-year-old Adama Traoré in police custody on July 19. The rally, planned by the Traoré family, was halted by police.

Traoré's death triggered riots in his hometown, Beaumont-sur-Oise, and in several other Paris suburbs, where security forces were deployed under the French state of emergency to crack down on the protests.

CRS riot police blocked the procession, citing an order by the Paris police prefecture to prevent it from taking place. The prefecture's communiqué claimed the protest ban was necessary for “reasons linked to the protection of the institutions,” “to the preservation of public order,” and to ensure “the security of the protesters themselves.” It claimed that authorisation to protest had been denied because the application had been filed too late, after the deadline of three days before the event.

This reactionary ban is yet an attack on the right to assemble and to protest, amid the all but permanent state of emergency imposed by the Socialist Party (PS) government of President François Hollande. When youth and workers protested against the PS's regressive labour law this spring, the PS sent riot police to crack down on protests, and ultimately took the unprecedented step of threatening to ban protests outright.

Claims that the Traoré family and its supporters are a threat to public order are brazen lies. Insofar as these claims have any foundation in fact, it is that the police and the French state fear that allowing any expression of social opposition to police brutality will lead to an uncontrolled explosion of social anger. Many French suburbs suffer from deep social crises, and in particular from soaring youth unemployment, and in recent years

they have witnessed mass urban riots pitting police against the population, notably in 2005 and 2007.

By banning the rally, the authorities are seeking to whitewash the lies told by the authorities in the aftermath of Traoré's death. New autopsy reports have revealed that Traoré died of asphyxia, refuting various, mutually contradictory police accounts of Traoré's death that attributed it either to cardiac arrest or to infections of his internal organs.

The first autopsy report highlighted “an infectious phenomenon on several organs,” including the lungs and liver, and “no kind of violence to cause death,” which remains unexplained. Traoré's family then requested another autopsy by an outside expert.

The new autopsy report by the outside expert, the Medical-Legal Institute of Paris, found no evidence of heart disease or internal infections. The asphyxia that caused his death was likely the result of overwhelming force employed by the police during his arrest.

“We used only the force that was strictly necessary to control him,” police claimed. However, they added, “He had to bear the weight of all three of us at the moment that he was arrested.”

The Traoré family's lawyer, Yassine Bouzrou, said, “We have the cause of his death, asphyxia. Given the statements of the police, I would propose the hypothesis that the cause of death was compression of the thorax. The police got three people together to crush him, that could be a weight of approximately 240 kilograms.”

Another lawyer retained by the family, Frédéric Zajac, wondered how it was possible that the outside expert report “has found no infection” while the first autopsy had revealed “a serious infection of the lungs, liver and trachea.”

“The problem, is that this young man of 24 years of

age died of an asphyxia syndrome whose mechanisms the experts cannot determined,” Zajac said, who asked that “the truth be uncovered.”

In a statement, a relative of Traoré declared, “First they said it was a heart attack, then an infection, now it is asphyxia. ... What are they hiding from us? What really happened? From the beginning, youth in the neighborhood said the arrest took place in a violent fashion.”

“My brother died over a week ago, and we still do not know what caused his death. It is very difficult to mourn him under these conditions,” wrote Lassana Traoré in the statement.

Traore’s family is demanding a third autopsy report, which has been rejected by the judge handling the case. Two parallel investigations are conducted by the Research Section and the General Inspectorate of the Gendarmerie (paramilitary police).

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