

Riots erupt after youth sexually assaulted by French police at Aulnay

By Kumaran Ira
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Riots broke out on Saturday evening in the poor housing estate in Aulnay-sous-Bois, in the northeastern suburbs of Paris, in protest against police brutality. Four officers have been charged with using excessive violence and raping an innocent 22-year-old, Théo, with a police baton.

The incident sparked popular outrage on Saturday and Sunday evening, with minor clashes and arson attacks on the sprawling Estate of the 3000. A car was set fire and bus shelters smashed. On Sunday, riot police were deployed and arrested at least five people.

The assault took place on Thursday afternoon, when four police officers arrived on the housing estate and began doing identity checks on the youths. During the operation, Théo was allegedly forced to the ground and beaten by police officers, one of whom assaulted Théo with a baton. Théo suffered anal injuries 10 centimeters in depth, requiring immediate surgery, as well as injuries to the head and face.

Yesterday, BFM TV released a recording in which Théo recounts his arrest and his barbaric assault by police.

Théo said, “He was looking at me, he was behind me but at an angle, so I saw what he was doing behind me. He took his baton and stuck it in my buttocks, voluntarily. As soon as he did that, I fell on my stomach, I had no more strength. Then he said, ‘hands on your back,’ I had to put my hands on my back, they handcuffed me and they told me to sit down. So I told them I couldn’t sit down, I don’t feel my buttocks anymore, so they put tear gas in my head, my mouth, they hit me on the head with a baton, and I had so much pain in my buttocks that this pain seemed temporary.”

“I had trouble walking, I was not myself. I thought I was going to die, I was walking but it was because they

were holding me up,” he said.

Once he was inside the police vehicle, Théo reported, police beat him and insulted him, calling him a “dirty bitch.” It took them several hours to call an ambulance.

Théo said, “The medics turned me over, looked at the wound and said, that is very serious, the opening is at least 5 or 6 centimeters, we have to operate and as fast as possible... They said I had lost a lot of blood. ... The baton injury in the buttocks they gave me, it marked me for life, it is something I wouldn’t wish on my worst enemy, physically I am very diminished, I can’t move... I can’t sleep at night.”

Judicial sources say images show two police “trying to subdue” Théo, apparently as he intervened to try to protect one of his friends. “They quickly use tear gas. Their colleague is alone, he gets out his telescopic baton and strikes the individual’s legs, apparently trying to make him buckle at the knees.” The source added, “On the video, we see a blow from the telescopic baton, horizontally, at the victim. The blow pierces his underwear, we think this was what caused the injury.”

Initially, the public prosecutor’s office in Bobigny tried to cover up the police brutality, opening a judicial investigation simply for “violence.” It issued a statement declaring, “Police were carrying out identity checks on a dozen people after hearing characteristic cries from lookouts trying to protect drug dealers.” During this operation, they “tried to carry out the arrest of a 22-year old,” and “in the face of his resistance,” they “used tear gas and, in one case, a telescopic billy club.”

After video images on the Internet clearly revealed police brutality against Théo, Bruno Beschizza, the right-wing mayor of Aulnay-sous-Bois and a former police officer, was forced to condemn the violence.

Calling the decision of the prosecutor's office to open an investigation for violence and not for rape "a miscarriage of the truth," he said that "police are there to protect and not to humiliate our fellow citizens."

On Sunday, the investigating judge in charge of the case decided to prosecute the officer who used the telescopic baton for rape. The four officers, who deny the charges, have been suspended.

The savage and horrific assault on Théo is the product of many years during which police have been able to treat residents of working-class suburbs in France brutally, and with impunity. This only got worse when police were handed extraordinary powers under the terms of France's effectively permanent state of emergency, which has been constantly extended since the November 2015 terror attacks in Paris. At the same time, the influence and political prestige of the neo-fascist National Front among police officers has continued to rise.

Aulnay is a devastated city, suffering from deplorable social conditions, particularly soaring unemployment. In recent years, it witnessed mass riots pitting police against the population, notably in 2005 and 2007.

This social crisis is the product of decades of reactionary policies conducted by successive governments of all political colorations. Three years ago, the Socialist Party (PS) government, with the help of the trade unions, closed down the PSA Peugeot-Citroën's car factory in Aulnay, eliminating 3,000 jobs.

PS presidential candidate Benoît Hamon ritualistically called for a "determined and transparent inquiry," in an attempt to head off growing anger among suburban youth. He tweeted a message saying, "Police represent the Republic, which is a protector. We must urgently reestablish [popular] confidence" in police.

Long and bitter experience has shown, however, that the assurances of figures like Hamon are utterly worthless. Each time police brutally attack youth in such neighborhoods, they enjoy state protection; charges against police have been dropped after evidence of police brutality was suppressed or covered up.

Last summer, 24-year-old Adama Traoré died in police custody after his arrest. His death triggered riots in his hometown, Beaumont-sur-Oise. Although

autopsy reports revealed that Traoré died of asphyxia due to excessive police violence, authorities tried to cover up the fact and whitewash the killing. They limited protests by family and friends, citing the terms of the state of emergency.

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