

Police launch mass arrests on Bastille Day in Paris

By Will Morrow and Alex Lantier
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Two hundred thirty years after the storming of the Bastille prison launched the French Revolution in 1789, President Emmanuel Macron's government carried out mass preventive arrests, rounding up well known "yellow vest" protesters on Bastille Day in Paris yesterday. Macron was booed and jeered as he drove in the motorcade down the Champs-Élysées on the traditional military parade Sunday morning.

According to the Paris police prefecture, 175 people were arrested throughout the day, most of them in locations around the annual military parade down the Champs-Élysées avenue. Almost all the arrests were based on charges of "organization of an unauthorized demonstration."

Paris police prefect Didier Lallement had one day earlier issued a blanket ban on any assembly of people "claiming to be 'yellow vests'" on Bastille Day inside an exclusion perimeter including the Arc of Triumph, the Champs-Élysées, the Concorde, the Louvre, the Invalides and the Eiffel Tower. This extraordinary police-state measure meant banning people from entering these areas simply based on their political beliefs, without their having committed any criminal act.

A chilling Facebook live video published by the "yellow vest" page shows a police van driving a group of arrested protesters in central Paris through an empty industrial area near a police station and arriving at a group of empty warehouses that had been set up by police to detain them, surrounded by barbed wire. The detainees can be heard shouting that the "Nazis are waiting for us" and that they are being brought to "concentration camps."

Police carried out targeted arrests of well-known figures associated with the "yellow vest" protests that began in November last year and have taken place each Saturday in opposition to social inequality. Maxime Nicolle, Jerome Rodrigues and Eric Drouet were all arrested and placed in detention for several hours on charges of

organizing an unauthorized demonstration and "rebellion." They were released several hours later, with all the charges dropped.

Nicolle was arrested while filming a Facebook Live video walking down the Avenue de Friedland, which is not part of the banned zone. A motorcade of a dozen masked riot police can be seen arriving and encircling him before placing him under arrest. According to Juan Branco, who is acting as Nicolle's lawyer, the police could be heard saying to one another, "There we go, that's the third one."

Branco noted that the extent of Nicolle's planned demonstration was to turn his back to President Macron as he rode down the Champs-Élysées. "We have to ask ourselves about the degree to which we accept the anti-democratic turn of the current government," he said.

Drouet was arrested by plainclothes police officers in the crowd at the Bastille Day parade on the Champs-Élysées, as he stood still and filmed with his phone.

This action, taken thanks to extraordinary powers granted to police in the wake of France's 2015–2017 state of emergency, points to the advanced state of preparation for authoritarian rule in Europe. Determined to step up austerity measures concentrating wealth in the hand of a tiny corporate elite while arming the French and European armies to the teeth, the ruling elite cannot tolerate any independent expression of popular or working class opposition.

They ruling classes internationally are orienting towards police-state measures and the promotion of fascistic and far-right forces against the workers. In the United States, the Trump administration has begun mass round-ups of undocumented immigrants. In Germany, the political establishment and media have legitimized and promoted the neo-fascist Alternative for Germany as the official opposition party. It has covered up for the assassination of

a major German politician, Walter Lübcke, by an individual with close ties to neo-Nazi networks.

The Macron government, which utilizes every opportunity to declare that the “yellow vest” protests are finished, is terrified of any expression of the mass hatred that exists towards his government. Interior Minister Christopher Castaner told BFM-TV yesterday: “Those who wanted to prevent this parade should be ashamed. Today is a day where the nation is united, and I think that the nation must be respected.”

The Bastille Day celebrations have always been used for the promotion of French militarism. While they formally mark the anniversary of the storming of the Bastille and the French Revolution, the military parade celebration was only initiated almost a century later, in 1880, nine years after the crushing the workers’ Commune in Paris and France’s defeat in the 1870 Franco-Prussian war. From the outset, it was used to glorify the army.

The parade began this year with the bizarre spectacle of Franky Zapata, France’s jet-ski champion, standing on his Flyboard Air machine, a kerosene-powered hoverboard, and piloting it down the Champs-Élysées, brandishing an assault rifle for no apparent reason at the spectators below.

This began the traditional massive display of military hardware on Bastille Day that was taken as a model by Donald Trump for his recent militarized Fourth of July celebration. Some 4,299 soldiers and officers marched down the Champs-Élysées. Also involved in the parade were 67 airplanes, 40 helicopters, 196 automobiles, and 237 horses.

Military equipment was stationed throughout the city. Active troops with rifles were stationed near the Invalides.

The militarist character of this year’s parade was made even more explicit by the context of growing “great-power conflict” and Macron’s push to promote a European army capable of acting independently of and in opposition to US imperialism. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, ex-Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel, and European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker all attended the event. Macron made prominent reference to calls for a European Union (EU) army in the traditional presidential Bastille Day speech.

“Never since the end of World War II has Europe been so necessary. The building of Europe as a military force, linked to the NATO alliance whose 70th birthday we are

celebrating, is for France a priority,” Macron declared. He added, “It constitutes the red thread unifying this parade.”

In the run-up to the Bastille Day parade, Macron made a series of military announcements, pointing to the massive expenditure of resources in France on the military.

Last week, Macron and French Defense Minister Florence Parly had unveiled the Suffren, the lead of a new class of French nuclear-powered attack submarines. Macron stressed that the development of submarine technology is critical not only to French plans for attacking warships, but also for French nuclear war strategy. The building of the six new submarines at a cost of tens of billions of euros is, Macron declared, “emblematic of the renewing of our capacities, which will involve not only our conventional forces, but also those involved in nuclear deterrence.”

Macron also launched over the weekend France’s Space Command, which formally assigns outer space as a field of military operations to the domain of the French air force.

He said, “The new military space doctrine proposed to me by the minister [of defense] and that I approved will allow us to ensure our defense of space and thanks to space. We will reinforce our awareness of the situation in space, we will better protect our satellites, including by active methods. And to give flesh to this doctrine, to ensure the development and the reinforcement of our capacities in space, a great space command is being created in the air force.”

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