

# Revolt of the urban poor in France

Hasan Refik

The streets of France were ablaze for the better part of a week. The brave young people, mostly of North African or sub-Saharan African descent, from the “banlieues” or the poor neighborhoods that surround French cities, especially Paris, Marseille, and Lyon, took to the streets with their rightful hatred, setting fire to police stations and police vehicles, or to various buildings they identified with the state. When they could not put their hands on those, they burned garbage bins, cars, and bus stops. By July 4, it was estimated that more than 12,000 garbage bins, nearly 6,000 vehicles, and over a thousand buildings were burned or damaged. So be it. One should give scant attention to material destruction when the police have killed yet another child of the working people. I am neither an insurance seller by profession nor have the habit of lamenting over buildings while working-class youth are being butchered in broad daylight. For me, the importance of the burning streets of France lies in what they signal for class struggles, first and foremost in Europe, but also worldwide.

## France at a tipping point

France holds a peculiar place in 21st-century Europe. While in many European (and Western in general) countries, the bourgeoisie was able to launch its onslaughts against the gains of the working class under auspicious conditions, the belated French bourgeoisie found a formidable opponent. This was covered in depth by our comrade Sungur Savran in a Turkish-language article he penned in 2023.<sup>1</sup> The

---

<sup>1</sup> Sungur Savran, “Fransa’da ‘Mezarda Emeklilik’ Mücadelesi Üzerine 22 Tez”, 9 April 2023,

results were on-and-off flaring ups of the class struggle almost every year without fail since 2016, save for a short hiatus during the heyday of the Covid pandemic. The form of these struggles, and even the social forces leading them, changed from year to year. But the long and fierce battles waged by workers, public servants, and the lower strata of the petty bourgeoisie (most notably in the case of the Yellow Vests), as well as university and high school students, in differing combinations and with unequal strength from year to year, remained a constant. I made this point already well before the urban poor revolts in the summer, on the occasion of the strike movement of the French working class against the new pension bill, in a Turkish-language piece.<sup>2</sup> Now, the revolt of the poor neighborhoods, coming on the heels of the strike movement, marks an acceleration in the spasmodic movement of French politics over the last eight years.

The contractions have become ever more frequent, and the birth is imminent. A birth, or a breaking point, is looming large over French politics, yet only the course of the class struggle will determine whether the outcome of this turning point in France will be the most advanced example of the already-rapidly-rising fascism in the 21st century or the first decisive victory of the working class. This is because France, along with Italy, is the European country where proto-fascism and fascism (which go hand in hand, as I will discuss later) have reached their greatest strength. Put differently, both revolutionary and distinctly reactionary outcomes are conceivable. If the window of opportunity for a revolutionary solution is to be missed, and the French working class and working people are unable to give the coup de grace to the enemy, fascism is lurking to seize first France and then Europe by the throat. This is the crux of the matter: France cannot remain Macron's France. Either the working class will come to power and succeed in creating France in its own image, or the hideous face of fascism will rise from France.

### **The nature of the rebellion from 2005 to 2023**

The mass mobilization that broke out on June 27, when cops shot dead Nahel, a 17-year-old North African boy, was neither the first nor will it be the last. Although they seldom turn into revolts, French banlieues often witness demonstrations, sometimes spanning more than one city, more often than not happening against police violence. So, in a sense, banlieue protests are a regular item in French politics. One may be impressed by the strength and spread of the protests now, but their existence should come as no surprise. On the very contrary, those who seek to tread the path of revolution in France should, or should have taken into account the actions of the poor neighborhoods and, as its zenith, the revolts as part and parcel of this revolution (I will come back to this later in the article.)

Let me start by contextualizing the 2023 banlieue revolt. Many observers, friends and foes alike, have rightly compared it to the revolts in 2005, which lasted

---

<https://gercekgazetesi1.net/uluslararasi/fransada-mezarda-emeklilik-mucadelesi-uzerine-22-tez>.

2 Hasan Refik, "Fransa'da Grev Dalgası: 31 Mayıs Taksim, En Güzel Kılığıyla, İşçi Tulumuyla", 27 March 2023, <https://gercekgazetesi1.net/uluslararasi/fransada-grev-dalgasi-31-mayis-taksim-en-guzel-kiliginda-isci-tulumuyla>.

for weeks. The mere existence of the 2023 uprising is of great importance as it proves that the 2005 banlieue revolt was neither an exception nor an oddity, but that this phenomenon will continue to play a role in 21st-century French politics. Beyond this broad-brush observation, the 2023 revolt shows a number of continuities with its predecessor in 2005, as well as some differences. First, the most important one. The nature of the revolt and the composition of the classes and social strata within it are almost exactly the same. The main force of the revolt is the urban poor youth living in the neighborhoods surrounding France's big cities – also known as banlieues. The lives of urban poor youth in these neighborhoods, as in many other countries, show a significant permeability with the lumpenproletariat. On the one hand, when they can land a job, these youths work at the neighborhood doner shop or “tabac,” a kind of French coffeehouse that sells tobacco, coffee, and alcohol, or if the family has a car, they work as Uber drivers at night. Since even these precarious job opportunities are limited, when they are out of their reach, they turn to the illegal activities of the lumpenproletariat. The most common form of this is the small-scale sale of drugs, especially cannabis, in the neighborhood. The impact of this transitivity manifests itself in various ways. First of all, drug use is quite common among banlieue youth. Although I do not have statistics on this issue, I would extrapolate from personal experience that the use of drugs, particularly their low-strength and easy-to-find kind, is much higher among banlieue youth than among other social groups. Moreover, the prevalence of drug dealing and drug gangs also affects the political climate in the neighborhoods, especially in the Marseille area. During the 2005 riots, one of the most important reasons that the banlieues around Marseille remained silent was the intervention of drug gangs. The fact that this time, despite the influence of the drug gangs, the revolt has mobilized huge chunks of the local youth in the Marseille neighborhoods has attracted the attention of even the bourgeois newspapers. This must be written in the list of the rebellion's successes.

One should also note that there is a palpable proletarianization among neighborhood youth, especially with the increasing number of them working as delivery people for online apps. Working in this sector becomes an increasingly viable option among neighborhood youth, both because it does not require special training and because it does not require any upfront capital, such as, for instance, finding a vehicle for Uber. The development of this sector in the neighborhoods, which is much more suitable for collective organization than, say, working in a doner or tabac, should be noted as a trend that may have important repercussions in the future. However, this tendency is still only a nucleus and has not yet reached a decisive significance. It should be added that workers in this sector in France have not yet undertaken collective actions or mass organizing on the scale seen in Turkey, Greece, or even in various Gulf countries. The union organizing efforts in this field, which have increased rapidly in recent years, may change this situation in the future. For now, however, we note this as a trend to be followed rather than a decisive factor.

This is a youth revolt through and through. According to statistics provided by the French state, the average age of the 3,600 people detained as of July 4 was 17. I think one would be hard-pressed to find another example of a mass of tens

of thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands of young people, almost all of them children, taking to the streets almost on their own and fighting the police. Another importance of this statistic is that it gives clues about the relationship between 2005 and 2023. I am positive that many of the young people who participated in this uprising must have heard tales of heroism about 2005 from their older brothers and sisters in the neighborhood. However, the average age of the detainees shows that many of the young people who fought in the 2023 revolts were not even born at the time of the 2005 uprising. In other words, a whole new generation is rising up against the same problems, using the same methods, in the same neighborhoods. The conclusion should be clear: It takes no magic ball to predict that the revolt of the banlieues will play a major role on the road to revolution in France well beyond 2023.

One of the elements that gives the situation in the French banlieues its specificity is the entanglement of the class struggle and the national question. The overwhelming majority of the urban poor youth mentioned above are descendants of people from France's former colonies in North Africa (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia) and West Africa. This has several implications. First, most of these young people are Muslim. Indeed, a huge banner with the phrase "Allah y rahmo Nahel" - the French spelling of the Arabic phrase meaning "May Allah have mercy on Nahel" - has been seen at demonstrations at the hands of young people. This means that these young people are directly affected by the growing Islamophobia in France. Secondly, these Arab and black youth, Muslim or not, are often subjected to the most vicious racism. The third point is directly related to the previous one. These young people are indeed struggling with racism, but contrary to what Western media frames it through a liberal lens, this is not about "fighting racist prejudices within France." The poor people of these neighborhoods do not face racism simply because they look different. Unlike, for example, Chinese immigrants (who are very numerous, especially in some French cities), they are subjected to a contempt that is nothing but the venous legacy of French colonialism, since they come from France's former colonies. The police behave as if they were on colonial soil in the neighborhoods in question, and the state often acts no different than an occupying power would. In response, especially among the North African youth, embracing the national symbols of their country of origin becomes a form of challenging this oppression. Every major victory of the Algerian national team turns into a huge demonstration. From time to time, the state responds with the bizarre decision to ban the flying of the Algerian flag, for example, in Nice during the 2014 World Cup. This multidimensional national contradiction, combined with class contradictions, creates an extraordinarily explosive setting.

Another continuity between 2005 and 2023 reveals perhaps the greatest weakness of the protests. On the one hand, the youth display an almost astonishing capacity for organization. Both the videos and the eyewitness accounts display that, in many cases, groups of young people wearing some kind of uniform (usually consisting of black tracksuits) were the beating heart of the protests, quickly and cohesively determining the route to be taken and even the targets to be attacked. In some cases, these groups are said to have sub-units that use different insignia. For example, a group responsible for breaking security cameras was identified by its

different clothing. This proclivity for successful quasi-military organizations also gives hints as to how a bunch of 17-year-olds can fight armed state forces tooth and nail for days on end.

An excellent capacity for military organization, but only military organization, alas. In 2023, as in 2005, the revolt is unable to produce from within itself a self-organization similar to the forums of, say, the popular revolt in Turkey in 2013, or a leader or a committee that can formulate its demands. The conclusion to be drawn from this is not (as the French state and its media have made it out to be) that these protests are not politically oriented. But it does show that, unlike, for example, the workers' protests, the banlieue youth, which is a bit of a greenhorn actor in historical terms, is still at the beginning of its struggle and cannot base itself on a historical experience in organizing.

The disadvantage created by the movement's lack of internal organization in 2005 came to a head when state forces used this weakness to isolate the revolt. Both the state and media hammered the same misleading message time and again – that there was nothing political about the uprising, and it was but the doings of a group of *racaille*, or the scum (as put by the infamous Nicolas Sarkozy, then Minister of the Interior). Unfortunate as it is, without a counter-narrative from the revolting youth themselves, these arguments came to convince the overwhelming majority of French society. The state returned to the same tactic in 2023. It has managed to rally the likes of Fabien Roussel, leader of the French Communist Party (PCF), behind it, saying that there is no politics here, only blind violence.

Unlike in 2005, this state tactic has not produced complete success. On the one hand, the protests did fail to enlist the backing of the majority of the population in the polls, contrary to the case during the Yellow Vests or more recent labor protests. 53 percent of the public find Nahel's killing "inexplicable" and "inexcusable," according to a poll by the Elabe company. However, when asked whether they find the protesters' violence against the police understandable, only 20 percent said that they concur with the statement (although it should be noted that this percentage reaches 40 among young people under 25). As mentioned above, the inability of the youth to organize their own committees and spokespersons to challenge the picture depicted by the state plays an important role in this conundrum. However, the fact that two out of every five young people – representing the general profile of the French youth – come to the radical position of "finding the violence against the police understandable" can be seen as an accumulation of the fact that in the last eight years, a wide variety of groups in France have fought against the state and the police.

But the most important reason why the 2023 banlieue uprising could not be isolated like 2005 is that various left and revolutionary groups in the big cities showed solidarity with the uprising. We use the word "solidarity" deliberately and do not give it an absolutely positive connotation, as does the left in general. In France, a significant part of the mainstream left and the extra-parliamentary left forces, except the PCF, not to count Jean-Luc Mélenchon's party, Unbowed France (LFI), showed solidarity with the banlieue revolt. But this solidarity must be understood dialectically. On the one hand, this solidarity and symbolic actions were a first step

toward breaking the isolation. But choosing symbolic solidarity instead of rallying to the ranks of the revolt, instead of trying to mobilize the working class with the quintessential methods of this class, such as strikes and factory occupations, is also choosing not to be part of the revolt. For now, I will content myself with mentioning this issue in relation to breaking the isolation of the revolt and leave aside the second dimension of the topic to be picked up in the last part of this article.

One of the most important differences between 2005 and 2023 is the geographical spread of the revolt this time. In 2005, the revolt was limited to the neighborhoods surrounding the big cities, especially Paris. Now, it has spread to hundreds of settlements all over France. According to the reactionary French newspaper *La Croix*, 533 settlements in total have been affected.<sup>3</sup> The proto-fascist leader Marine Le Pen has also acknowledged this spread, saying (albeit for different purposes) that until now, only the big cities were affected by this problem, whereas now smaller settlements face the same issue. For Marine Le Pen, making this point is a transparent attempt to scare the white French population into her ranks. But the fact stands, and the geographical spread of the protests points to another prospect. Just a few months ago, I wrote that the protests against the pension bill had spread to small towns across France in an unprecedented way.<sup>4</sup> While the workers' actions are penetrating the capillaries of France, the revolt of the banlieue youth is also reaching the small towns, showing that it is no longer confined to the biggest cities. The form of the relationship between these two forces will be determined by the struggle for hegemony in the coming months and years. The clout of Marine Le Pen and proto-fascism in the small towns and cities where the workers' protests have recently spread, and the influence of proto-fascism on the workers in these areas, mean that there is even a risk of an internecine fight between the banlieue youth and the workers in the small towns. But if French workers succeed in reaching out to their brothers and sisters in the banlieues, if they succeed in making them understand that their interests and their bid for liberation are one and the same, then the alliance between the working class and the banlieue youth will become a frightening force to be reckoned with not only in the big cities but throughout France. This configuration would put the French bourgeoisie and rising fascism on the back foot. In other words, the daunting prospect of rural France besieging revolutionary Paris, present throughout the history of revolutions in France, will come to naught from the very beginning.

### **The law of war and contradictions with the French state**

Now, let us turn our attention to the other side of the barricade. My first point concerns an issue that the Western press, which eagerly jumps on when the same thing happens in Hong Kong or Iran, has successfully and conveniently neglected. After the appeasement tactics of the first 24 hours, the French state applied what amounts

---

<sup>3</sup> Bernard Gorce, "La carte des émeutes de 2023 n'est plus celle des « banlieues chaudes »", 07 July 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/98ux8cvz>.

<sup>4</sup> Hasan Refik, "Fransa'da Grev Dalgası", <https://gercekgazetesi1.net/uluslararasi/fransada-grev-dalgasi-31-mayis-taksim-en-guzel-kiliginda-isci-tulumuyula>.

to the law of war against the banlieue youth both during and after the riots. Although it is not possible to get our hands on exact statistics on this, the violence against the detained protesters, both during detention and in the police vehicle and police station, is not unlike what one would see in the states that the Western media would call a “regime” in a heartbeat. Most of the protesters taken to court have marks of police violence on their faces or bodies. The courts are working like an accelerated sentencing factory. Just a week into the protests, 380 of the approximately 3,600 people detained had already been *convicted*. There is no doubt that this number has increased thereafter. But just as importantly, I believe that this situation carries meanings beyond the usual violence of the bourgeois state, betraying important contradictions within the French state, and is worth dissecting further. Let us first recall the course of the main events.

After the news of Nahel’s murder broke, in the first 24 hours, French President Emmanuel Macron employed a tactic that was meant to illustrate the purportedly benevolent face of the state. Nahel was murdered in the early hours of the morning of June 27, and protests emerged the following night with great force in Nanterre, Nahel’s neighborhood, where the murder took place, but had not yet reached the scale of a nationwide revolt. Under these circumstances, Macron and the French state evidently thought that they could defuse the protests before they escalated, perhaps even containing them in Nanterre. On June 28, after the first night of protests, Emmanuel Macron issued a statement saying that Nahel’s murder was “inexplicable” and “inexcusable” and expressed his grief. On the same day, Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne expressed her condolences to Nahel’s family, saying, “there shall be no doubt that justice will be served.” Even more counter-institutively, Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin – who holds the dubious honor of giving fascist Marine Le Pen a run for her money when it comes to justifying and endorsing state violence against immigrants and minorities – said on the same day that the videos of Nahel’s murder were “shocking” and that the police officer in question had been suspended.

On the second and third nights, as the protests spread across the country and turned into a revolt, the French state changed course. When it became clear that the youth would not be fooled by the so-called benevolence of the state nor by the promises of justice that had been given a thousand times and broken a thousand times before, state brutality came into play. Apparently, misgivings within the state continued on June 29. As the protests spread across the country and the police force deployed against the protests increased drastically (even at the peak of the strikes and street clashes in March, 12,000 police were deployed, while this number was 40,000 on the evening of June 29, increasing to 45,000 by June 30), Prime Minister Borne stated on June 29 that the conditions for the state of emergency had not yet been established.

June 30 saw two striking developments. On the one hand, Prime Minister Borne indicated that the government’s position had changed within 24 hours and that a state of emergency was on the table. On the other hand, the two major police unions in France issued a joint statement saying, “we are at war against the pest” and “the cops are fighting because we are at war.” For all intents and purposes, the statement amounted to nothing less than a call for civil war. The last sentence of the

declaration, which reads, "tomorrow we will be in resistance, and the government must realize this," is particularly striking in the French context, where the word "resistance" (La Résistance) immediately brings us to the armed struggle of the partisans during the Second World War. In other words, with thinly-veiled menaces, these cop unions were threatening to take up arms – with or without the government.

Even if we do not read too much into this timing, the simultaneity of the two statements is striking for more than one reason. The two police unions that made this statement (Alliance and UNSA Police) received around 50 percent of the vote in the 2022 police union elections. When they stood independently in 2014 and 2018, their combined vote was around 45 percent. Hence, this statement cannot be explained away as a harsh declaration by a fringe police organization. Rather, it means that half of the police apparatus is challenging the government and declaring that they will act independently of the government, if need be. To this picture, one must add the statement of another, much smaller police union (France Police-Policiers en Colère) (which got around three percent of the vote in the same elections), which openly congratulated the police for killing Nahel. This means that *more than half of the police apparatus is lined up behind the program of civil war*. It has long been known that fascism, in particular Marine Le Pen's party, the RN (National Rally), held great sway over the French police. But with the crisis that began with the revolts in the banlieues, this force is raising its head and openly challenging the current rulers of the state for the first time. This may not be the last. Today, because the political crisis ended relatively quickly, the Alliance-UNSA Police alliance – which seems to be acting as a united front of the fascists within the police – has only issued an ultimatum. In the not-so-distant future, and in the event of a longer and deeper crisis, it should not be ruled out that this could go well beyond an ultimatum, and that *important sections of the police could rally under the control of the fascists*.

In my view, this threat to Macron's control over the state's coercive apparatus is one of the elements that explain the French state's application of a sort of law of war. Lest there be any confusion, this does not mean that Macron and the French state would not have used force against the revolts without the threat posed by the fascists through the police unions. Such moments of revolt and crisis are always the moments when the true limits of bourgeois democracy are revealed. What matters here is that during the revolt, the Macron government was not only fighting the revolt itself but also struggling to keep its hegemony within the state, which on the surface was a test of its control over the police apparatus (but which may also have its reflection within the French haute bourgeoisie and the army). Practices such as the conviction of hundreds of protesters within a few days and the complete carte blanche to police brutality are maneuvers at least partly designed *to come on top in the struggle for hegemony over the police apparatus*. The presence as Minister of the Interior of Gérard Darmanin, who was known to have joined fascist organizations in his youth and often responded to Le Pen's anti-immigrant statements by upping the ante and by "out-fascist-ing" Le Pen, is one of Macron's most important trump cards in this struggle for hegemony.

The repercussions of this fracture are also likely to find an echo, albeit less



visible, in the ranks of the haute bourgeoisie and the military. The MEDEF, France's main boss union, has enjoyed exceptionally good relations with Emmanuel Macron. But the fractures between the MEDEF and Macron have begun to surface, especially in spring 2023 with the protests against the new pension bill. Sometimes with intentionally leaked reports, sometimes with thinly-veiled statements, MEDEF has begun to criticize Macron. And it just so happened that as the revolts were rocking France, MEDEF held internal elections (scheduled well before the revolts). Geoffroy Roux de Bézieux, who had led the organization for five years, stepped down and was replaced by Patrick Martin, who had been de Bézieux's deputy until then. There is no sign that Martin is particularly anti-Macron. But it is noteworthy that the new leader of MEDEF promised to be "on the offensive." Under Martin's presidency, the fracture lines between Macron and the MEDEF, of which we have seen the first signs in 2023, could widen. A potential result of this tendency would be a faction of the haute bourgeoisie openly backing Le Pen's RN or another form of fascism or proto-fascism. It is possible that in France, with its concurrent crises and protests, Macron's rule will start to seem too costly for the bourgeoisie. Right now, this is but a fracture, but the increase in workers' protests and banlieue riots could lead the haute bourgeoisie to look for alternatives more suited to implement its intention to be "on the offensive" – Le Pen, with her iron fist, would be a tempting option.

There are no such concrete signs within the military at the moment. Two years ago, however, retired generals virtually issued an ultimatum to the Macron government, threatening a civil war in which "the death toll would be in the thousands," in their words. Immediately afterward, this time active-duty officers (without revealing their names) declared their support for the ultimatum and its authors, and Le Pen immediately made public her support for the soldiers who penned the declaration and called on the soldiers to join her party, the RN. Moreover, in 2017, at the beginning of Macron's rule, Pierre de Villiers, then Chief of the General Staff, openly and harshly criticized Emmanuel Macron during the July 14 celebrations, France's national holiday, revealing the tension between the military and the government. Let anyone be gullible enough to think that the military would stand aloof in a political crisis that would pit the haute bourgeoisie and the police apparatus against Macron. Let us not forget that France's current 5th Republic is also the product of a military coup in 1958, triggered by the Algerian Revolution.

### **Fascism and proto-fascism lurking behind**

Fascism is by far the political force most prepared for this major historical turning point in France. On the one hand, the proto-fascist Marine Le Pen and her party, the RN, have spent the last 15 years growing almost incessantly under the conditions of the Third Great Depression. RN has gradually attracted the working class, historically the base of the French Communist Party, especially in the proletarian areas of northern France. It rallied the petty bourgeoisie around the party, especially in the so-called periphery of France, that is, in the small and often neglected towns. Moreover, through a systematic operation of "dédiabolisation" (un-demonization of the party) over the years, it convinced the forces that had once shown their

willingness to unite against Le Pen both at the ballot box and on the streets – not least in the 2002 elections - that RN was “just another party among parties.” It also successfully braved the storms that the party went through. In 2017, Le Pen’s right-hand man (and representative of the anti-EU wing of the party) Florian Philippot split away from the RN (then known as the FN) and founded his own party; in 2022, a second proto-fascist leader and party to rival Le Pen emerged in the person of Eric Zemmour (probably with Macron’s underhanded support to divide the fascist vote), but the rise of Le Pen and the RN continued unabatedly. Today, in the case of an eventual crisis that would create a political void – and in the glaring absence of a revolutionary alternative – the most likely force to take advantage of Macron’s undoing and come to power is Le Pen and the RN.

The crisis triggered by the murder of Nahel and the ensuing short-lived revolt enabled a number of forces in the fascist camp to make their move. We use the term “fascist camp” deliberately. Because it was not only Le Pen’s party, the RN, that was mobilized, but a number of organizations large and small. During the revolt, Le Pen was in the enviable position of sitting and letting Macron’s popular support wither away while her party stood to gain the most. Le Pen emphasized that both Macron and the LR (Republicans) party, which had been in power in the recent past (under Jacques Chirac and Nicholas Sarkozy), were responsible for this crisis through their immigration and security policies. Put differently, French fascism recalled that it was the only force on the right that was not responsible for this crisis. (Don’t be fooled by the relative moderation of the stance here; Mussolini, before he came to power, led the “moderate” wing of his own party for a brief moment in what came close to a schism, even showing tactical flexibility to the point of advocating a truce with the socialists). In a sense, RN leadership knew that unless they made a mistake, this issue would hurt Macron and increase their support, so they quietly let the crisis score political points for RN. They were not off the mark: In the first post-revolt opinion polls, Marine Le Pen is placed on top with 37 percent popular support.

But the RN was not the only one seizing the occasion. A number of overtly fascist organizations, most of them organized in only one city, took to the streets with their militias in order to crush the revolt by blunt force. In the early days of the uprising, fascist Telegram channels began to circulate the call to “reconquer Paris with 10,000 men.” This initial call went unheeded, and there was no “march on Paris,” so to speak. But in a number of other cities, local fascist groups began to organize to quash the revolting masses with knives and clubs. In Angers, members of the previously banned Alvarium organization (now called RED) went on the hunt for protesters with iron bars and baseball bats from June 30 on. In Lyon, “Remparts2Lyon,” the new name of the previously banned Génération Identitaire, and in Chambéry, members of the previously banned Bastion Social took to the streets armed with clubs.

This development is important in at least three regards. First, French fascism has made it clear that in the event of an uprising, it will emerge as the paramilitary forces of the established order. It goes without saying that in none of the examples mentioned above did the police confront fascists (with the partial exception of Lyon, where the police are said to have used tear gas when the fascist militia tried to storm

the town hall, but it is clear that this was because the fascists were targeting state institutions and as long as the target of the attack was the protesters, cops had no qualms). But beyond this, in Lorient, for example, there have been reports of militias calling themselves “groupes anticasseurs” acting in concert with the police and beating young protesters under the benevolent eye of cops. Moreover, the French army was forced to launch an investigation after reports that these “anticasseurs” included navy men (Lorient is one of France’s most important military ports, so there are around 4,000 naval personnel in the city). ***This development amounts to nothing less than the French equivalent of Baltagiya (paramilitary forces used by Hosni Mubarak to quash the Egyptian revolution manu militari) making their debut on the political scene!*** The emergence of police-sanctioned fascist violence and the French Baltagiya is not anecdotal. From this stage onwards, every major workers’ protest and every popular revolt has to take into account that it will have to fight the fascist militias and the French Baltagiya and accordingly create its own self-defense apparatus, not least the workers’ militias.

The second issue, the relationship between proto-fascism and fascism has significance transcending France. For this reason, we hope that the reader will humor my rather long digression on this issue. *Revolutionary Marxism* and its political tradition have for years called parties such as the RN in France, the Fratelli d’Italia (Fd’I) and the Lega in Italy, the AfD in Germany, and Vox in Spain proto-fascist instead of fascist. Perhaps the most decisive factor here was that these parties lacked militias for street violence for the time being, and in this respect they differed both from classical fascism in Germany and Italy, and from recent examples such as the RSS (National Volunteer Organization) in India or Golden Dawn in Greece (banned in 2020). We never excluded the possibility that, at a certain stage, these proto-fascist parties could organize their own paramilitary forces one way or another. ***I believe that the developments in France, especially in conjunction with Italy and the US, are beginning to reveal the concrete forms that the transformation of proto-fascism into fascism will take.***

The relationship between proto-fascists and fascists followed two distinctly different trajectories in Italy and France. In Italy, Italian fascism had long been a significant force, notably CasaPound and Forza Nuova. Although they lacked the votes, these organizations have long been able to organize in many cities, quickly take to the streets, use violence and, through their central organization, define an Italy-wide political strategy. The two major Italian proto-fascist parties mentioned above, Lega and Fd’I, had a significant but secondary power in Italian politics until the major breakthrough of the former in 2018-2019 and the latter in 2022 (of course, proto-fascist parties were much more massive than fascist parties, and by secondary here we mean compared to other mainstream forces in the country’s politics). In France, until the last five years, open fascist organizations were small local groups, without the power to take to the streets and without a nationwide leadership (the pro-monarchy fascist organization Action Française, which boasts of being the oldest political party in France, or the once active GUD, which had a nationwide organization but was very weak). The proto-fascist FN, on the other hand, has come out on top or as a runner-up in almost every major election since 2014.

In the last few years, proto-fascism in Italy and fascism in France have surged to create a more even equation. The Italian proto-fascists have increased their votes by leaps and bounds and have even succeeded in forming a government, something that Le Pen has been denied for years. French fascists, on the other hand, have rapidly increased their militant power. At least since the university occupation movement of 2018, it started to constitute a force that has taken to the streets at every major turn, clashed with protesters, and some of its spokespeople have become nationally known media personalities. In this process, a *Modus Operandi* in the collaboration and the alliance between the two sides has gradually become established. This relationship somewhat varies from case to case and from organization to organization. In Italy, for example, Fratelli d'Italia, the organizational successor of Mussolini's PNF (National Fascist Party), which has many fascist cadres in its ranks, can develop significantly more direct and deeper relations with fascist organizations than the Lega, which comes from a completely different political background. In France, Eric Zemmour's Reconquête, which emerged suddenly in the 2022 presidential elections, has become a shell for fascist organizations and cadres to use as a kind of united front, especially during the electoral process, given that – and unlike the RN – it does not have long-standing local organizations. But beyond these differences, in general, the *fascist organizations retained their independent existence, taking over the exercise of street violence but knowing full well that they would have the support of the massive and parliamentary proto-fascist parties - and in some cases, even a place on their ballot.* (Note that similar situations have existed even in the history of the communists, for example, in Italy after the Second World War, when armed anti-fascist groups such as “Volante Rossa” specialized in anti-fascist violence, often acting together with the Italian Communist Party, but without being subject to its discipline). So proto-fascists and fascists, in the words of an Italian journalist, “live together but do not marry.” In the US, the raid on the Capitol, led by the maverick fascist Donald Trump, saw fascist militia groups such as the Three Percenters, the Proud Boys, and the Oath Keepers cooperating with Trump's MAGA (Make America Great Again). Given how MAGA and fascists mobilized together, it can be argued that this type of relationship is not an exception limited to France and Italy, and that there is a strong possibility (but still a possibility among others) that it will emerge in countries like Spain and Germany, where proto-fascism is on the rise.

This relationship is far from smooth. Although the two sides often act together, the fascist organizations are not under the total control of the proto-fascists. This leads to disharmony between the two sides, sometimes even to mutual accusations. This relationship may take various forms in the near future. In France, the RN (or, less likely, the Reconquête, since it lacks a strong central apparatus) could absorb these organizations and turn them into militias acting within its own organizational discipline. Such a development would mean the completion of the process of proto-fascism turning into fascism. But this would be a true challenge, particularly for the fascists, who are already much more advanced in the methods of violence than the militants of the RN and might be reluctant to give up their organizational independence within the RN, whose militant base might still lack the “street credentials” that they have, as far as fascists are concerned. On the other hand,

if this challenging unity fails to materialize and if the militia forces of fascism remain fragmented and without a centralized leadership (especially in the case of France, which, unlike Italy, lacks a centralized fascist organization), this may prove to be a disadvantage for fascism in the decisive struggles ahead. Let us remember that when French fascism tried to take over power in the country on February 6, 1934, with an uprising, one of the two most important factors explaining the defeat of French fascism (along with the United Workers' Front, which was successfully implemented against fascism), was the fragmentation of French fascism at the time. Today, fascism has a united political leadership embodied in the RN (despite the presence of Zemmour and a number of smaller parties), but it remains to be seen whether it can form a united paramilitary force out of the fragmented fascist militias.

This brings us to the last point about armed fascism taking to the streets during the Banlieue revolts. I have mentioned above various examples where fascism took its militias to the streets. The fascists did take to the streets, but in most of these cases, the *youth who participated in the uprising used violence to defeat the fascist militias*. In a previous article, I mentioned the proclivity of the urban poor youth participating in the revolts to street violence. Another dimension of this skillset, as I mentioned above, manifested itself in the quasi-military organization of the youth. The result was that the fascists hit a brick wall when they tried to beat the revolt into submission. After videos of fascists taking to the streets in Chambéry, for instance, videos of fascists moaning in agony on the ground began to circulate on Twitter. In Angers, the fascists first attacked the protesters, who were outnumbered, and then had to flee to their office after an impressive attack by the mass of protesters. To add insult to injury, the youth targeted the fascists' association and rendered it unusable. Photos circulating on the internet show a ruined association building with the words "death to the fascists" written on the walls! As the French say "à la guerre comme à la guerre" (if you are at war, act like you are at war). The success of the banlieue youth in repelling the fascists by force should be an example for workers' organizations. All workers' organizations, from trade unions to political parties, must set themselves the task of protecting their actions and institutions with the same determination and discipline in the face of the rising fascist threat, and of forming workers' militias to ensure this security. Fascism and fascist terror are not invincible. A United Workers' Front that unites workers' organizations against fascism without hindering the political independence of the organizations involved, and workers' militias prepared to use any means necessary against fascist terror will have no difficulty in crushing fascist aggression. The success of the youth with their quasi-military discipline on a limited scale is proof enough.

### **The misery of the left**

The deeds of the French left in the face of the revolt have been nothing but shameful. The mainstream left either turned its back on the revolt and the youth or took an openly hostile stance. The Socialist Party, once one of the two major political forces in the country but now moribund, first published a short and bland text signed by the party's secretary general, Olivier Faure, expressing its sorrow for

Nahel. Yet, two days later, both the party and Faure seemed to have forgotten all about Nahel and were busy condemning the “violence” of the youth! The Greens (EELV), another major force of the mainstream left, had already begun to call on the protesters for common sense and restraint, even before the riots had reached their climax.

The French Communist Party has not only called for restraint but has openly sided with the French state. This is hardly the first time the PCF has done that. The PCF’s long-standing process of taking more and more right-wing stances took a leap forward in 2018 when Fabien Roussel took the helm of the party. Under Roussel’s leadership, the PCF began to pursue a policy of “law and order,” in particular to outflank the fast-rising (and soon to be discussed) Jean-Luc Mélenchon and his France Unbowed party from the right. As a result of this orientation, in 2021, when the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Paris Commune was on the agenda of the French left, I personally witnessed at least two workers’ rallies in which Roussel and the PCF, who went and supported the police demonstrations for tougher laws, with the words “*Versillais, get out*” (referring to the Versailles government that emerged in 1871 as the center of counter-revolution against the revolutionary power of Paris). Now, the same PCF is using the revolt to prove its “respectability” in the eyes of the forces of order. Not only did Roussel and the PCF join the chorus of restraint, but they attacked Mélenchon when he took a brave stand and declared he was not calling for restraint but for justice. When Macron came out and talked about a social media blackout, Roussel immediately concurred and said he wanted a “state of emergency for social media.” A befitting trajectory for a party that will go down in the annals of history as the paramount example of treachery!

Jean-Luc Mélenchon and his party, LFI, deserve special mention. Mélenchon is a politician who started his political career in an organization with revolutionary Marxist origins, then moved to the Socialist Party, even rising to the position of deputy minister in Lionel Jospin’s government in the early 2000s, before breaking away from the Socialist Party to the left and founding his own movement. After the electoral defeat of the Socialist Party in the 2017 presidential elections and the PCF in the parliamentary elections, Mélenchon and the LFI have become the biggest forces of the left in France. Mélenchon is neither a communist nor a revolutionary. He is a reformist politician who forbids the use of the red flag at his rallies, who is influenced by French nationalism, and whose main political program is to replace the current 5th Republic with a 6th Republic. But the LFI is distinguished from the rest of the left both by its occasional (albeit inconsistent) challenge to NATO and the EU and by the popular masses it reaches. ***Apart from the smaller revolutionary Marxist parties, the LFI is the only political force that can speak to the workers, some of whom are increasingly coming under Le Pen’s spell after the left has shackled itself with the straitjacket of identity politics.*** This is no coincidence but the product of a conscious strategy. Already in 2012, when his movement was still very modest in size, Mélenchon ran as a candidate in Hénin-Beaumont in northern France, where Le Pen had her own slate for parliament. He lost the election by a lopsided margin (the Socialist Party’s candidate won a razor-thin victory in the second round against Le Pen, so neither Le Pen nor Mélenchon was elected), but it

already spoke volumes that he was up to challenge Le Pen in her own stronghold and to campaign to the masses there. Today, Mélenchon's is the only left-wing force that has a meaningful impact on the working people of small towns and cities where Le Pen wields great power. For instance, in the run-up to the presidential elections in 2022, according to a poll conducted by the BVA, 44 percent of the Yellow Vests planned to vote for Le Pen, with Mélenchon coming in second with 28 percent. Not-so-close behind was the proto-fascist Zemmour with 9 percent. The rest of the left and the traditional right are completely absent! So, at the moment, only Mélenchon has succeeded (even if partially) in challenging the fascists for the hearts and minds of the working people who increasingly started to back fascism. This is a point of no small interest.

What is more important for this article is Mélenchon's influence both on the black and Arab populations of the banlieues and in French colonies such as Guadeloupe and Martinique. To illustrate the extent of this sway in the banlieues, let me mention the striking example of Seine-Saint-Denis. This administrative unit is located just northeast of Paris and includes towns like Bobigny and Saint-Denis, which were once part of the "red belt" under the absolute domination of the PCF but have now become the epitome of poor Arab and black banlieues. In this region, where the left has traditionally been strong, *the right-wing parties won five of the 12 seats in the 2017 elections, four of which went to Macron and his allies. In 2022, the NUPES, a left-wing alliance led by the LFI (but also including the PCF, the Greens, and the Socialist Party), won all 12 constituencies.* Nine of these 12 deputies were elected from Mélenchon's LFI, including Jérôme Legavre, a POI (Independent Workers' Party) militant, who was elected from LFI lists.

This success is a direct product of Mélenchon and the LFI's years of unwavering opposition to the weaponization of secularism in France as a means to oppress the Muslim minority. This seems to have yielded impressive results. According to Ifop, a very reliable polling organization, 69 percent of Muslims in France voted for Mélenchon in the presidential elections in 2022. During the revolt, Mélenchon's stances clearly strengthened his position in the banlieues and increased the confidence of the working people of these neighborhoods in the LFI and in him. As I wrote above, Mélenchon refused to join the chorus of "calls for restraint" and stated in no unclear terms he wanted justice, not restraint. He denounced the bourgeois intelligentsia who tried to pressure him into condemning the revolts as mere "watchdogs" (*chiens de garde*). Moreover, he asked the youth to "not burn libraries and schools" in what was seen as a tacit endorsement of violence against other targets, such as police stations. In other words, of all the political groups mentioned above, Mélenchon and the LFI were the only major forces that did not treat the popular revolt as a natural disaster to be contained, and who had the courage to side with the revolt. If nothing else, this is honor enough for Mélenchon.

What I have discussed so far was basically the mainstream left and the French Communist Party, which was moving confidently to the other side of the barricade. They sided with the order and not the revolt – there is no news here. But what about the forces that come from the revolutionary Marxist tradition and still have a socialist revolution in France in their program? To answer this question, we should go beyond

the immediate span of the revolt in the summer of 2023. The response of the extra-parliamentary left, whose major representatives are Lutte Ouvrière (LO, Workers' Struggle) and the NPA (New Anticapitalist Party), to the revolt has taken place over the last 18 years. Most crucially, these organizations have not made any headway among banlieue youth since the first revolt in 2005. During the 2023 uprising, I have not come across a single case in which these large organizations took part in the movement with their militants from the banlieue youth (if they have any), or even formulated the political demands of the uprising with their militants in the movement (we have mentioned above how the lack of political organization is a great disadvantage despite the strong quasi-military organization of the uprising), or took a step to organize the youth, for instance, in neighborhood committees. Not to mention that I have not heard any effort from these organizations – whose militants number in the thousands and whose main strength is concentrated in the Paris region – opening an association or establishing any sort of foothold in, let's say, Saint-Denis or Nanterre (where the protests started), which are accessible by metro from the center of Paris and constitute the most important center of the banlieue youth. The forms such as associations I mention here are mere examples – the main take is this: *in the 18 years since the first revolt, these organizations have not taken a single concrete step to obtain a footing within the banlieue youth.*

We would like to underline how striking this lack of interest is. In 2005, when the youth of the banlieues rose up and fought the police for weeks, any revolutionary organization that took itself seriously and wanted to do justice to the name “revolutionary” should have analyzed what this revolt meant on the path to revolution in France and taken concrete steps accordingly. The significance of the banlieues, which have been bursting onto the scene with large and small explosions not only in 2005 but ever since that, should be obvious to any revolutionary who takes their task seriously. In an article I penned in March in Turkish, before the Nahel murder and the revolt had even taken place, I made the following observation:

In the 21st century, at the same time, the poor people of the banlieues have risen up on several occasions, most notably in 2005. As is the case all over the world, this mass movement, which also demonstrated the skill of the young urban poor in the use of violent methods, also showed how formidable an enemy it could be against the police and law enforcement agencies, especially in cases like 2005, when it was not confined to a single banlieue. But in none of these struggles that have marked the last two decades have these two great forces [working class and banlieue youth -HR] been able to reach out to each other. When the banlieue youth stood up, the organized working class stayed away, and now, when the organized working class is striking, the banlieues are silent. However, as I wrote above, in a scenario where the banlieues, which are very adept at street violence, rise up with the working class, the government in France would not last a single day! The French police, who even now lack the ability to concentrate their forces in big cities like Paris due to the spread of the protests to hundreds of cities and who are said to be facing serious logistical problems, would prob-



ably be completely inadequate against both the barricades of the workers in Paris and the revolts of the youth in the banlieues. *The conclusion to be drawn from this is clear. A revolutionary organization in France worthy of this name must set the historical goal of building an alliance between the banlieues and the organized working class under the leadership of the working class, just as the communists of the 20th century set the alliance of the working class and the peasantry as a strategic task.*<sup>5</sup>

So how is it that mighty French organizations missed what we saw or have not taken concrete steps that logically stem from this observation for 18 years? It is obvious that I cannot be a better observer of France than its revolutionary organizations. The answer is simple: the overwhelming majority of the once revolutionary left all over the world, including France, has long ceased seeing revolution as a concrete goal. How could those who do not organize for the goal of revolution, who do not set their sights on rallying society around the working class (the reasons for this are very different for the LO and the NPA, the examples mentioned above, but I will not go into that in this article), see different layers within the working people as essential elements of the future revolution and understand that they too have a role to play in it?

And what could have been done, you may ask? There is no need to go far for a positive example. Analyzing the defeat of the popular rebellion that started with Gezi in 2013 in Turkey, the Revolutionary Workers' Party in Turkey (DİP) identified that one of the biggest weaknesses of this rebellion was that the working class did not participate in it with the methods of the class, namely with strikes and factory occupations. As a result, the party's 3rd Congress, which convened after the rebellion, concluded that the party "should consider this prolonged silence of the working class as an 'advance' given by history to strengthen itself within the working class, and should turn it into a silver lining" and concluded that "[w]ith all our energy, we must give priority to organizing within the vanguard of the working class." The result of this is the "strategic positioning" orientation that the DİP has been pursuing for the last ten years. History gave the French revolutionaries such an advance of 18 years. This 18-year advance has been wasted. What an absolute pity.

The left in France, and particularly those coming from diverse revolutionary traditions, did not (not "could not," but "did not") fulfill this historical duty and instead called for solidarity actions in major cities, especially in Paris. Both these organizations and a number of trade unions, notably the CGT, supported the two major demonstrations for Nahel in Paris, in some cases participating in the organization of the demonstrations themselves. How so wonderful. As I mentioned above, the strength of these solidarity actions played an important role in the 2023 revolts not being completely isolated, unlike their 2005 counterparts. Not that we downplay their importance. But to get stuck in a solidarity role is also to detach your own fate from the fate of the revolt. As admirable as it is that they did not turn their backs on the task of solidarity and stood up for the youth of the banlieues, it is nothing less than

---

<sup>5</sup> Hasan Refik, "Fransa'da Grev Dalgası", <https://gercekgazetesi1.net/uluslararasi/fransada-grev-dalgasi-31-mayis-taksim-en-guzel-kiliginda-isci-tulumuyla>.

## **Revolutionary Marxism 2023**

criminal that these groups could only serve as a force of solidarity – despite the 18-year historical advance between the two uprisings.