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By Alex Lantier
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Police crack down on undocumented workers occupying Paris Pantheon

Yesterday afternoon, 700 undocumented African workers **occupied** Paris's historic Panthéon building, **chanting** “Black vests” and demanding recognition of their right to reside in France. The protest, whose name referred to “yellow vest” protests against social inequality over the past six months, was met with a violent police crackdown.



Protest inside the Pantheon [Credit: Thomas Clerget]

Police forcibly evacuated the Panthéon, then kettled and charged at demonstrators behind the building, arresting at least 37.



Police preparing to charge the protest

The events in Paris are part of a growing wave of protests internationally in defense of immigrants and refugees and against the authoritarian, anti-immigrant measures of capitalist governments. While the “black vests” protested in Paris, more than 700 “Light for liberty” demonstrations were scheduled to take place the same day across the United States, in opposition to a wave of planned immigration raids by the Trump administration to round up and deport as many as one million undocumented immigrants.

Hundreds of thousands marched in Italy against the anti-immigrant policies of the far-right government. In Germany, there is mass opposition to the anti-immigrant policies of the Grand Coalition and the persecution of Carola Rackete, the German sea captain of the *Sea Watch 3* vessel, who has been persecuted for saving refugees in the Mediterranean.



During the police crackdown at the Pantheon [Credit: La Chapelle Debout]

The “black vest” protesters selected the Panthéon—which houses the remains of numerous cultural and political figures, including Enlightenment thinkers Rousseau and Voltaire, novelist Émile Zola, and socialist Jean Jaurès—to denounce the contradiction between the democratic pretensions of the French Republic and its vicious oppression of refugees. Entering the building at 2 p.m., they demanded a meeting with Prime Minister Édouard Philippe to obtain their papers.

As speeches took place outside the building, groups of protesters distributed a statement published in the name of the “Gilets Noirs” and the La Chapelle Debout collective, which organized the protest.



A section of the protest outside the Pantheon [Credit: La Chapelle Debout]

It states: “We are the *sans-papiers* [undocumented], voiceless, and faceless in the eyes of the French Republic. We have come to the site of your great citizens to denounce the desecrations of the memories of our comrades, of our fathers and mothers, our brothers and sisters in the Mediterranean, in the streets of Paris, in the centers and the prisons. France continues slavery through another means.” Since 2015, as an intended result of the anti-immigrant policies of the European Union, at least 14,000 refugees from Africa have drowned in the Mediterranean attempting to reach Europe.

The protesters pointed to the intolerable social conditions in which masses of refugees and poor workers live in Paris. “We are occupying this building because there are 200,000 free buildings in Paris, while we sleep under highway overpasses, and as the mayor yesterday cleared the refugee encampments at Wilson Avenue in Saint-Denis [in Paris’ outskirts].”

The statement also pointed to other actions organized by the collective, including the occupation of the Elior tower at the La Defense business district and the Air France terminal at Charles de Gaulle airport. “That is where the police bundles us onto planes for Algiers, Dakar, Khartoum, Bamako or Kabul,” it states. “We went to tell the corporate heads, who humiliate us and break our backs, that fear is on the other side.”

The police forces reacted with a violence that has become a daily occurrence in the wake of the imposition of a state of emergency by the Socialist Party in 2015 and the repression of the “yellow vest” protests by President Emmanuel Macron since November last year.

At 4:00 p.m., the police entered the Panthéon and expelled the protesters, who chanted, “What do we want? Papers! For who? For all!” The protesters insisted that they would only leave together. Slightly before 5:00 p.m., the police had cleared the building without clashes, before kettling the demonstrators outside.

While the protest remained calm, the police rapidly escalated the violence. The police first sent snatch squads into the group to seize targeted individuals, arresting six. Then, after demonstrators had made appeals on social media for their supporters to come join them, the police violently charged and assaulted the protesters.

Thirty-seven people were arrested, and a number were reportedly hospitalized. As of yesterday evening, 21 protesters remained in detention in Paris, according to the Facebook page of La Chapelle Debout.

The violent crackdown testifies to the class gulf separating the undocumented immigrant workers from the political establishment. A number of political figures—including deputies from Jean-Luc Melenchon’s Unsubmissive France, Danièle Obono and Éric Coquerel—took part in the demonstration, issuing general statements of support. This was hypocritical posturing from a party whose leaders have supported neocolonial wars in Africa and called for protectionist policies in order to divide French workers from their class brothers and sisters in Africa and internationally.

Ruling circles overwhelmingly reacted with horror and outrage at an occupation organised by undocumented immigrants demanding their democratic rights. The leader of the far-right National Front, Marine Le Pen, vituperated on Twitter: “It is INADMISSIBLE to see militant undocumented workers occupying, with impunity, the great place of the Republic that is the Panthéon. In France, the only future for undocumented immigrants should be expulsion, because that is the LAW.”

Maintaining the position of the government against “yellow vest” protests, Prime Minister Philippe defended the violent action of the police. “All the people who entered the Panthéon have been evacuated. France is a country of laws, with everything that that implies: respect for residency rights, respect for public monuments and the memories that these represent.”

The self-satisfied declaration of Philippe, that he heads a “state of law” protecting public monuments and the memory of France, is a cynical fraud. Macron and Philippe do not represent the democratic traditions associated with the figures buried in the Panthéon any more than Le Pen does.

The police-state measures put in place by all the major capitalist governments are particularly directed against immigrants, the most vulnerable section of the international working class. While Trump adopts increasingly fascistic measures targeting immigrants, the European Union tramples upon the right to asylum, building concentration camps in Africa to prevent refugees from escaping the consequences of NATO-led wars in Africa and the Middle East. The EU has canceled rescue operations in the Mediterranean, leading to 14,000 immigrant drownings in the Mediterranean in the last three years.

This attack against immigrants is the spearhead of a rehabilitation of nationalism and of military-police repression that threatens the social and democratic rights of the entire population.

Macron made his position on the “memory” of France clear by calling fascist dictator Philippe Pétain a “great soldier” last year. Then he launched the greatest wave of arrests in Metropolitan France since the Nazi Occupation, arresting more than 7,000 “yellow vests.” Now, he is launching a series of deeply unpopular social cuts targeting pensions, unemployment insurance, health care and education.

The occupation of the Paris Panthéon, like the wave of US protests to defend migrants, is part of an international resurgence of the class struggle against this violent shift towards the far right of the ruling classes—with US teachers strikes, the “yellow vest” movement in France, and mass protests demanding the fall of military dictatorships in Algeria and Sudan. A decisive element in the class struggle will be the defense of immigrants, including their right to live and work in any country of their choosing.

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