

Party Politics Policing and Repression

France's Police Unions Are Gaining Power — and They're Denouncing the Left

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Recent years have seen growing calls for more accountable law enforcement in France — and an intense backlash from police unions. As the country votes in parliamentary elections, police leaders are openly refusing to accept the Left's legitimacy.

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There will be immense protests within the Police Nationale,” Yves Lefebvre told *Jacobin*. “I said that I will never obey [Jean-Luc Mélenchon](#). France would be set on fire, but this time it would pit the Police Nationale against the political powers of the day,” said the secretary-general of the interior ministry section of Force Ouvrière, a branch of France's largest police union.

“Between the plague and cholera, I prefer the plague,” he continued.

I mean having to manage social movements against retirement reform with a government that, whatever else you might say about it, has supported its police since 2017. . . . With Mélenchon, there'll be no retirement reform, but instead of protesters in the streets against [the reform], there'll be police protests against the sitting government. And they'd be quasi-insurrectionary.

Lefebvre maintains that he's “a man of the Left.” But his prognosis of how police forces would react if Mélenchon's left-wing coalition wins a majority in this Sunday's elections — an [unlikely prospect, despite its lead in the first-round contests](#) — was hard to distinguish from a threat. Yves Assioma, one of his counterparts at Alliance Police Nationale, often characterized as France's more overtly right-wing police union, was more restrained. “We've adapted to the government,” he said, “and often, *often* it's also the new ministers who adapted to their police.” Assioma was pointing to how the police apparatus has navigated prior political transitions, but it was also an implicit acknowledgement of the clout of this well-situated constituency.

Mélenchon is not, of course, France's prime minister. Having won 26 percent support last weekend, it seems that his [Nouvelle Union Populaire écologique et sociale](#) (NUPES) coalition will come up short in this Sunday's second round. If that's the case, Mélenchon will be out of office — he decided

against running as an MP — but still the de facto leader among left-wing political forces.

Mélenchon has, however, earned the ire of France's law enforcement unions. Lefebvre's speculations are reflective of the anxieties and preoccupations traversing a strained public institution, one that finds itself embroiled in festering national debates over racism, the legitimate use of lethal force, and crowd-control tactics often criticized as excessively repressive.

“Police Who Kill”

These questions have come back into headlines in recent weeks and have made their mark on the election campaign itself. On the night of April 24, two people were fatally shot by an officer on a bridge in central Paris. The officer involved was subsequently taken into custody over the lethal use of his firearm, which he purportedly used after the two victims failed to stop their car as per the officer's orders. Days later, on May 2, Alliance Police Nationale, joined by the Synergie-Officiers and UNSA Police unions, held a rally near the Palais de Justice attended by some eight hundred officers. Lambasting the officer's indictment for homicide, the union is calling for the codification a “presumption of legitimate self-defense” in cases involving the use of a firearm by on-duty police officers.

Since the mid-2010s, and especially through the *gilets jaunes* crisis of 2018 and 2019, French riot police and crowd-control protocols have come under increased scrutiny. This debate was reamplified — and internationalized — by the spectacle of the disastrous police management of the [Champions League Final](#) at the Stade de France on May 28. But instead of images of young protesters sparring with armored police, it was the sight of Liverpool fans reeling from the police force's seemingly ubiquitous use of tear gas that made the nightly news, and not just in France. The incidents were largely blamed by senior interior ministry officials on football hooliganism and a supposed wave of fake tickets.

On June 7, another individual — the passenger of a car whose driver likewise tried to flee a police stop — was fatally shot in a northern district of Paris. The officer implicated in the death is not facing legal scrutiny and has resumed service. But Mélenchon, responding to growing demands on the Left that French policing undergo a thorough national overall, denounced “an unacceptable abuse of power” by a police force that “kills.”

For those declarations, and Mélenchon's characterization of Alliance as a “factious” pressure group, the union [filed a lawsuit for defamation](#) against him. But it was hardly the first time that there have been tensions between Mélenchon and France's police unions. Most recently, in early May, Alliance launched yet another legal complaint against the politician when he again described it as a “factious union” that “demands the right to kill people.”

Lefebvre's Unité SGP Police-Force Ouvrière is not joining these ripostes. “Today the problem is the lack of penal responses to Jean-Luc Mélenchon,” he nonetheless claims.

How can a man who has the trappings of a political tribune, and who is ultra, ultra-mediatised, be allowed to insult the republican police without exposing himself to legal penalties? It's unacceptable. There is the constructive critique to be made, which consists in saying that there are things to be improved. I'm not someone who says that there is not racism in the national police. Obviously there are racists and violent men and women in the national police. But they are a very small minority.

"I'm going to be harsh, but he deserved it," Lefebvre [told Mediapart journalists](#) in early 2019, of a *gilets jaunes* protester whose hand was maimed by riot police.

Divides Within the Left

These defenses are not confined to organized police unions, whose very purpose is the unconditional defense of their members. Nor are they confined to right-wing politicians and government officials pandering to the police forces. This past March, Emmanuel Macron's interior minister, Gérard Darmanin, joined a parade of right-wing presidential candidates at an Alliance Police Nationale convention.

The fact that polls like that of [far-right TV channel CNEWS](#) indicate that over eight in ten French people "have confidence" in the police leads Assioma to dismiss criticism of the police as emanations of "a fringe of the extreme left that is anti-republican, or even at the limits of anarchism."

This is a gross mischaracterization. One of the telling signs of the police's relative imperviousness to criticism, however, is that early fissures within the newly formed left-wing unity coalition are precisely over the question of policing and police violence. The NUPES program reflects a consensus on the need to develop new local and community policing practices. But it evades the more frontal critiques coming from activists who target the structural nature of racism and police violence.

The Socialist Party has disavowed the terminology of "police violence," for example. In the NUPES program, [it succeeded in adding the disclaimer](#) that "the Socialist Party refuses the use of the term 'police violence'" and that therefore "it will not support the creation of an inquiry committee on police violence that has caused the death or mutilation of citizens." Having called in May 2021 for the recruitment of thousands of police officers, Fabien Roussel again [took his distance from Mélenchon](#) after the latter's sallies with Alliance Police Nationale, saying on the parliamentary election campaign trail that "we need better trained, and sufficiently numerous, police officers and gendarmes to guarantee our tranquility. Under no circumstances will I talk like that, ever."

These ripples bring back to the surface lingering divisions among the left-wing parties. In a major show of force in May 2021, Alliance and other unions held a large rally attended by several thousand police officers in front of the National Assembly. Coming on the heels of the police's constant mobilization through the COVID pandemic, which itself followed a period of intensified police activity in 2018 and 2019, the rally crystalized a growing restlessness within the police force. After a spate of murders of police officers, Alliance leader Fabien Vanhemelryck criticized the supposed laxism of the judicial system, famously declaring that "the police's problem is with the justice system." Mélenchon's France Insoumise was the only major political formation unrepresented at the rally, which was dutifully attended by Yannick Jadot of the Greens, Fabien Roussel of the Communists, and Olivier Faure of the Socialist Party.

Avoiding Scrutiny

It should come as little surprise that the interior ministry has thus far survived Macron's recent reshuffle unscathed. Having held the post since mid-2020, Darmanin's reappointment as interior minister has been interpreted as a nod to what is becoming a key pressure group. For left-wing critics, Darmanin — formerly a supporter of the conservative president Nicolas Sarkozy — is the incarnation of Macronism's true authoritarian colors. Within his administration, and among the "troops" under the purview of his ministry, he is largely perceived as a figure who [has kept his word](#)

relative to growing police discontent over working conditions and fended off attacks against an institution under increasing public scrutiny.

Through each of the recurring scandals surrounding the police, Darmanin has been as staunch a defender as any of France's "forces of order." His return to government is a message to police that their interests will be closely taken into account in the coming years. Before what is widely assumed to be a tense period of social movements, it is also a collateral on the loyalty of a vital segment of the French state. "Whatever the phenomenon — a problem of delinquency, urban violence, or preserving order — who's there to defend the sitting government? It's the police," says Assioma. "The police are the last rampart of the republic. If tomorrow . . . we cut the arms and legs off the police, it's the government that's going to give way."

The "global security law" was criticized as pandering to police, although some of its most aggressive measures — like restrictions on the filming of officers — were eventually censured by the courts.

"We need to restore respect in the work of law enforcement," says Lefebvre. This is a task that Darmanin has taken closely to heart, positioning himself as the scourge of the "delinquency" that is supposedly "ensavaging" France. Against left-wing activists and media organizations like the local media outlet and political collective Nantes Révoltée, Darmanin has threatened administrative dissolution in publicity stunts criticized as concessions to police unions. New security protocols, like December 2021's Schéma national du maintien de l'ordre, have largely ratified the aggressive tactics that interior ministry forces have developed in recent years as police have been called on with increasing frequency to carry the weight of the government's reply to social movements. Passed in 2021, [the "global security law"](#) was likewise criticized as pandering to police, although some of its most aggressive measures — like restrictions on the filming of officers — were eventually censured by the courts.

"The further you extend the police's purview, the more its authority suffers," Laurent Bonelli, a sociologist of the police, told *Jacobin*. But this paradox is just what many demands from police unions risk aggravating.

Chief among these is Alliance's calls for a "presumption of legitimate self-defense," which critics see as an attempt to shield police officers from any potential scrutiny that might question the use of force. "Our colleagues should systematically benefit from a presumption of self-defense," Assioma told *Jacobin*. "The second component is that we also hope that police officers can receive a special judicial status in order to avoid being taken into custody in cases of firearm use."

"That would be worthless," Lefebvre says. "French law already provides for the presumption of innocence. The presumption of self-defense, it's a fantasy, an ultra-populist position."

One of the questions that these forces agree on is in targeting a supposed wave of "delinquency" as the real problem ailing the police. "If certain delinquents had been condemned with severity that they deserve, we would not be where we are today," Lefebvre said, calling for tightened restrictions on judicial discretion in the application of minimum sentences. Contrary to these claims peddled by Darmanin and the far right alike, there is no wave of violent crime in France. Notwithstanding a

series of highly mediatized events, France has actually seen declining violent crime rates in recent years, [the New York Times reported](#).

Bucking the trend toward austerity, the interior ministry is also enjoying a spate of financial largesse.

But with police unions facing each other in the profession's own internal elections in December, there is no doubt an element of political jockeying among these organizations. France's unions enjoy among the [highest levels of unionization](#) in the country: upward of 65 percent of officers are in a police union, while over 80 percent of officers tend to participate in professional elections. These figures dwarf the unionization rates in other segments of the economy and even other public-sector professions.

"They can claim to have a real degree of representivity," says Bonelli, "they must each appear as being better at defending the officers than the others, which explains this constant one-upmanship."

A Protected Category

More funding, a breadth of new protocolar advantages, new recruitment promises, and upgraded equipment — the police unions' proximity and indispensability to power really is bearing fruit. "The police unions are the only ones that can stand for something without it being disqualified as a corporatist demand," Bonelli remarked. At the height of the movement against Macron's proposed retirement reform (eventually tabled in March 2020), the police unions [secured a special retirement system for officers](#), contravening a reform whose stated goal was the creation of a universal and unified system.

Bucking the trend toward austerity, the interior ministry is also enjoying a spate of financial largesse. Presented before cabinet in March 2022, a new interior ministry funding law will allocate an additional €15 billion in funding. Union leaders now look to lock in better pay raises in order to compensate for inflation, to secure special housing guarantees to help officers being priced out of urban areas, and to stem suicides within the force. "The police as the miracle cure to resolve social problems is a rather new idea," says Bonelli. "This development has, without a doubt, reinforced the power of the police within the state."

But this exceptional status hasn't prevented what Bonelli calls a "siege mentality" from taking over the institution. Between the new left's calls for police reform and the risks of a turbulent social climate in the months and years to come, Lefebvre said that "there's a sense of exhaustion about the events that are approaching, and weariness about the incoherence of the orders being given." But compared to the "cholera" of Mélenchonism, the "plague" of Macron has had its advantages for French police.

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P.S.

- Jacobine. 06.16.2022:
<https://jacobin.com/2022/06/french-police-unions-lefebvre-darmanin-crime-nupes-election>
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