`We're French, respect us`

A look behind youth riots in France

South African Labour Bulletin spoke to **Nicolas Pons-Vignon**, a doctoral student doing research in South Africa, to get some understanding of why young people in the suburbs of Paris rioted in November last year. Below some of the background issues are explored.

In November last year at least 6 000 cars were torched, schools went up in flames, and community centres were raised to the ground as young French people marauded across urban suburbs in a whirlwind of destruction. After a two week period of battling to keep these mobs under control, the government was forced to adopt emergency powers in an attempt to halt the rioting.

This unrest in over 274 towns was not an organised response to grievances. The riots originated when two young men were electrocuted in a power station whilst escaping the police. These were spontaneous riots and yet they had a long history.

WHO WAS RIOTING?

The riots originated in what are called Cités HLM. These are housing estates on the outskirts of most large French towns. The estates were built around all the major industrial centres and house large blocks of flats and are often referred to as 'banlieues' (suburbs) in France, although there are also rich suburbs.

After the Second World War, from the late1940s onwards, a period of reconstruction and rapid economic growth occurred in France. French colonies in Africa provided a cheap supply of labour to underpin this economic expansion. Representatives of French corporations went to villages and recruited the strongest and most able of men to work in French industry and construction.

Following this influx of migrant labour, in the 1950s and 1960s, the French government decided to construct housing for the French and immigrant (mainly African and Portuguese) immigrants, some of whom were living in slums. African workers were those of North African descent from places such as Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco and from French colonies in West and Central Africa. At the time this rapid provision of housing was seen as progressive because it provided large numbers of people with modern comforts and was successful in clearing slums.

In these Cités, communities were mixed. But, unlike in Britain, there was no state recognition of different communities requiring representation. This reflects the sharp difference between the French and British way of dealing with migrants. While the British recognise different groups, thus often forcing people into a particular identity, the French consider only individuals. If you gain French citizenship, in the state's eyes you are a full citizen and nothing else. The government viewed immigrants' cultural practices and religious beliefs as a private matter.

The later waves of migrants who came to France, either to work or to join family members, ended up living in the same suburbs. A wide racial mix resulted as well as a mix of generations.

The first generation of migrants tended to be grateful for the work, housing and wages they earned which sharply contrasted with the poverty in their home countries. They were reluctant to complain about the racism they experienced. The second and third generations who viewed themselves as French began to feel otherwise. They still visited the home country but they no longer identified with the lifestyle there. A cultural gap emerged as they began to see themselves as French. It was these

young second and third generation people who chiefly engaged in the November riots.

WHAT LAY BEHIND THE RIOTS?

In these mixed neighbourhoods an anti 'white French' and anti state feeling began to grow. Beyond the suburbs, young people saw middle class French families living in affluent houses, driving in comfortable cars, and going on expensive holidays. The youth in these suburbs identified these external signs of wealth as what it meant to be French and they felt excluded from it.

Many youths interviewed during the riots proudly demonstrated their French papers declaring, "We're French." They were tired of being narrowly rewarded and acknowledged for their contribution to the musical and sporting life of France alone. They experienced the strong geographic and class separation from the 'white French'. They wanted to participate in all aspects of what they saw as French life. And they wanted to be treated with 'respect' a term commonly used in interviews with rioting youth.

In recent times these young people have expressed a strong frustration with their parents' passivity and the reluctance of France to confront its colonial past. Young people started to express these sentiments through French hip-hop culture and music. Youth in these suburbs strongly identified with early 1980s US hip-hop culture – its alternative values but also its gangs, criminality and strong sense of solidarity. Some of the most well known hip-hop groups like *NTM* and *La Rumeur* reflect these diverse French immigrant communities.

This feeling of marginalisation from the French mainstream is made worse by high unemployment in these suburbs. In some areas it is as high as 40% in a country where the average unemployment rate is 10%. Over the last 15 years many of the parents of these young rioters have lost their jobs and now attempt to make ends meet through casual employment. Young school leavers find themselves with no prospects.

Even casual work is difficult for this layer of youth to obtain. Employers prefer to hire new, more passive immigrant labour than the streetwise, ghettoised youth. For these young people a strong feeling persists that their schooling has not prepared them for better opportunities in life. It was no accident that school buildings were one of the main targets during the riots. The school drop-out rate is high and school leavers often turn to petty crime. In some areas they have drifted into gangs and have taken part in more serious armed activity.

A further frustration for young people of the suburbs is a policing law which was passed in August 1993. The law gives the police the right to check IDs on demand which sometimes results in body searches. Young black people of African origin experience almost daily searches in and around Paris especially if they travel on public transport. The police are often hated for the public humiliation they inflict.

This complex of cultural, racial, political and economic factors combined with a strong sense of exclusion from mainstream French society, set the stage for an explosion of anger.

ABANDONED GROUP

People from the suburbs are strongly under-represented in political institutions in France. No

mass political movement exists that caters for their views and needs and mainstream political parties in general ignore this constituency. The media also presents these formerly immigrant communities in a negative light.

Youth culture is generally hostile to politics pursued by young people in more middle class areas. Youth groups have at times disrupted student demonstrations and engaged in open criminal activity amongst demonstrators. A strong male identity has surfaced as the disappearance of jobs has impacted on male self esteem.

The response to being marginalised has led to the adoption of an aggressive, reactionary stance. Young men from these suburbs are often openly hostile to gays, and engage in anti-Semitic and racist behaviour including at times attacks on other ethnic groups within their neigbourhoods. In consequence the traditional Left has mainly avoided organising in these areas.

Trade unions also have failed to organise workers from these areas. French trade unions, like many of their counterparts in developed countries, have become increasingly conservative and their organisation is patchy. Unions are not at the forefront of social struggles. They have also not made many inroads into organising casual labour. The more left leaning trade union federation (CGT) has organised pockets of casual workers. Some of its members occupied a McDonalds in Paris, for example, for 11 months when North African workers (who often work in the catering industry) were unfairly dismissed after trying to start a union in the restaurant. But organising casual workers has not been a systematic campaign.

Trade unions have failed to engage the state on questions of decent jobs for people in poorer communities. People in these areas talk of applying for hundreds of jobs but this seldom results in an interview. The fact that they are literate and educated has led them to expect better.

The state's model of community relations has not helped to deal with the riots because authorities did not have representatives to speak to. A noticeable difference exists between the French and British approaches to community policing in immigrant areas. In Britain the police have forged relationships with community leaders and as a result when riots erupt they held the advantage of being able to speak to respected community members. These community leaders have made the police more aware of issues stirring up resentment.

The French police on the other hand seldom go into immigrant suburbs and, as previously described, are not respected by these communities. They have few community contacts.

It is interesting to note that in the town of Saint Denis where the Communists dominate local government, and communication with local people is well underway, the area was not hit by riots.

REACTIONS & NEW-FOUND POWER?

The November riots were not the first warning for the French government. Smaller outbreaks of violence have taken place from time to time over the years. Recently too, members of the French national football team (some of whom come from these suburbs) have warned the government that it is sitting on a time bomb when it ignores the grievances of immigrant neighbourhoods.

The riots were greeted with shock amongst many citizens of the suburbs and elsewhere in Paris and France. France's biggest Muslim organisation, the Union for Islamic Organizations of France, issued a fatwa (religious decree) to try and halt the violence. It warned those "who seek divine grace" against "taking part in any action that blindly strikes private or public property or can harm others." [1] Its words went unheeded however. In the suburbs the more needy members of the community suffered most from the riots as important infrastructure was destroyed – recreation halls, post offices, schools, and buses.

The government initially condemned the youths involved in riots. Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin, however, later announced a reallocation of budgetary resources to these areas. It is clear that in the absence of any formal representation of this group, the riots achieved this. The unrest has also allowed people in these areas to realise that they have some power and potential for influence and change. An initiative, driven largely by sport and hip-hop personalities, has called suburb youth to register to vote for the next elections. It is only a beginning, but it points to one way of tackling these issues: to articulate the claims of these youth in a political arena, not only in the street. LB

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[1] *Business Day 8/11/05*