

In France, Just Like the United States, We Can't Breathe - A historic wave of protest against racism

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Cities across France are seeing a historic wave of protest against racism and the killing of young black people. The French revolt was sparked by the demonstrations in the United States — but it's fueled by police brutality at home.

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Souzie missed out on Paris's first big protest against police brutality — the unexpectedly massive rally on June 2 in support of Adama Traoré, a twenty-four-year-old who died in police custody in the city's suburbs in 2016.

But the twenty-one-year-old health aide from the département of Val-d'Oise — the same one as Traoré — was proud to be able to make it for round two last weekend. "I'm a young black woman living in a pretty complicated country," Souzie told me at a jam-packed Place de la République on Saturday. "And all the people here, we've seen just a little too much injustice."

That feeling extends well beyond the capital. Over the last two weeks, demonstrations against police violence have [erupted](#) across France: in big cities like Marseilles, Lyons, Nantes, and Strasbourg, but also smaller ones like [Dieppe](#) and [Avignon](#). While triggered by the protest movement in the United States over the death of George Floyd, they've been fueled by a renewed focus on cases of police brutality much closer to home.

"The state continues to protect the real criminals," Souzie told *Jacobin*. "We accuse our victims — Adama or whoever — we look into their past [and say], 'Yes, you're criminals, you did this, you did that,' while the police that kill them are the real repeat offenders, always hidden by the justice system and always getting out of it. I think at some point, we need to revolt and say enough is enough."

Litany of Victims

Not unlike in the United States, protesters in France point to a litany of victims of police violence, a long list of names of those who never survived their confrontations with law enforcement: [Zineb Redouane](#), [Steve Maia Caniço](#), and [Liu Shaoyao](#) in recent years, as well as the much older case of Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré, whose deaths while fleeing police sparked three weeks of riots and

unrest in 2005.

Nobody, though, has received more attention or galvanized as many in recent weeks as Adama Traoré. On his twenty-fourth birthday in July 2016, Traoré was detained and pinned down by three police officers, reportedly telling them before he died that he couldn't breathe. Since then, his sister, Assa Traoré, has fought to shine more light on the circumstances of his death, launching a "committee for truth and justice" and leading a grueling court battle that remains ongoing. As it stands, none of the police involved have been charged, while autopsies have shown differing causes of death. Some point to preexisting heart problems; others to asphyxiation as a result of the pressure applied by the detaining officers.

The Traoré saga has been in the news for years, but it's taken on greater meaning in the aftermath of the George Floyd protests. When Assa Traoré called for a rally outside a Paris courthouse earlier this month on just a few days' notice, at least twenty thousand people showed up — a feat made all the more impressive by the fact that crowds braved a police ban to attend. That mass turnout also served to bolster what Assa Traoré and her supporters have [argued](#)—that Adama Traoré's death is emblematic of a bigger problem of racism and discrimination within the police forces and the French state.

Reality of Racism

Race is a famously thorny issue in France and the government itself doesn't collect any data on ethnicity. Officially, that's because the French Republic is colorblind: under its universalist values, one's origins have, in theory, no bearing on one's French citizenship.

Mainstream debates often center on how to make the state better live up to its republican promise. But they rarely challenge the ideology that lies beneath it — the notion that too much emphasis on the ethnic or religious backgrounds of citizens risks reducing them to these various identities as such.

This vision is often contrasted with the "Anglo-Saxon model," seen by its many French critics as dividing civil society into innumerable communities of difference and undercutting the state's egalitarian mission.

But the grand promise of French republicanism has always been challenged by facts on the ground. Over the past few weeks, a fresh barrage of news stories has shown how some in the police force haven't even pretended to adhere to the official values. For them, in fact, ethnic differences appear to matter a great deal.

One [report](#) revealed how a group of about a dozen cops in Rouen, Normandy, exchanged a series of white supremacist messages in a WhatsApp group in late 2019 — and how whistleblowing efforts from a black colleague led nowhere. Shortly after that, reporters from StreetPress [exposed](#) a private Facebook group of eight thousand members from across the country, in which police regularly exchanged racist commentary. Then came reports of yet [another](#) similar Facebook group, this time with more than nine thousand members.

Investigative news outlet Mediapart [published](#) a scathing private report from France's Defender of Rights — a sort of civil rights ombudsman appointed by the president — that weighed into a court battle over alleged discrimination in a gentrifying Paris neighborhood. In May, the agency's head, Jacques Toubon, criticized what he called "systemic discrimination" by police against local residents,

aged fourteen to twenty-three, between 2013 and 2015, documenting unjustified ID checks, arbitrary frisking, and the repeated targeting of youth of Arab and African origin that police referred to as “undesirables.”

The country’s ultra-tight coronavirus lockdown has also drawn attention to heavy-handed police tactics. From the onset of the national stay-at-home order in mid-March until late April, residents of Seine-Saint-Denis, a working-class département just outside of Paris populated heavily by immigrants and their descendants, were [cited](#) by police for breaking lockdown rules at a rate three times higher than the national average. NGO Human Rights Watch even [decried](#) the situation in a letter to the French government, calling for an end to “racist and discriminatory practices” on the part of law enforcement.

Fighting Back

All of this has helped to generate the groundswell of protest. In the process, it’s attracted people not used to taking to the streets — like Clément, a thirty-three-year-old resident from the Val-d’Oise who was in Paris on Saturday.

“It’s really the first time I’ve come to a protest — I’m not used to it because I’m usually working, but today I had a day off, and I thought, why not come and see what’s happening?” he told *Jacobin*. “I feel concerned, I feel impacted. I’m for race equality and equal opportunity.”

Also in attendance was Jérémy, a twenty-five-year-old middle school supervisor who took the train up from Marseille for the rally. He said an incident of racial profiling at an earlier protest in the Southern city motivated him even further: “After two minutes, police checked me because they confused me for someone else because I have the — quote unquote — profile.”

“It’s something that really impacts me, that impacts my brothers, my cousins — I have cousins that experienced police injustice that’s gone unpunished,” Jérémy continued. “I want to be part of this generation that changes things, that changes values and ways of thinking . . . when I look at my children later, I’ll be able to say, you can walk in the street without being stopped and checked by the police.”

Naturally, the protests over George Floyd’s death in the United States have loomed large. “It’s a good thing because we’re all standing up at the same time, it creates an international movement,” Jérémy said.

He also stressed that France doesn’t have the same history of segregation and that he believes discrimination in France is often bound up with one’s class background or geographic origins — for example, a zip code on a CV that signifies one’s residence in a low-income suburb. But Jérémy said that doesn’t mean the country is immune from racism, either. “When they say there’s no racism in France, that’s false,” he said. “There’s racism in every job, so saying there’s no racism in the police is impossible.”

Souzie the health aide, on the other hand, was more adamant about drawing parallels. “In the end, it’s the same thing, it’s racism,” she told *Jacobin*. “Whether it was George Floyd or Adama Traoré, it was done in the same way. It’s just that one was filmed and the other wasn’t . . . George Floyd is like Adama — it’s one time too many.”

An Enduring Struggle

The largely decentralized protest movement has proven surprisingly popular among the general population. One poll conducted on June 9-10 found that while most in France maintain an overwhelmingly positive view of the police, 51 percent expressed sympathy for the demonstrations while just 35 percent were opposed.

It's also produced some concrete results. President Emmanuel Macron has asked the country's justice minister to directly look into the Traoré case. And last week, interior minister Christophe Castaner unveiled a couple of reforms, promising to suspend officers suspected of committing racist acts or engaging in discriminatory speech as well as calling for a ban on police chokeholds — though authorities have since [confirmed](#) the technique will be phased out rather than abandoned immediately.

While the size and scope of the current protests are impressive, it's also true that France has seen prior waves of protests against racism and police brutality — and over the last four decades, movements representing those most directly impacted have ebbed and flowed. Assa Traoré and the Adama Committee have likened their struggle to the [Immigration and Suburbs Movement](#) (MIB), a grassroots anti-racist organization founded in 1995 that has waned in recent years.

But Traoré has also vowed to maintain her group's political autonomy and to avoid the fate of mass anti-racist protests in the early 1980s. The much-celebrated 1983 March for Equality and Against Racism was also rooted in opposition to police brutality, putting on display the grievances of a swath of the so-called second generation of immigration, the sons and daughters of workers who had come to France during the postwar boom. But a follow-up demonstration flopped the following year and the anti-racist cause was eventually commandeered by SOS Racisme, a nonprofit close to the governing Socialist Party.

This current upsurge has, however, remained very much independent of the institutional French left. The gulf between the two was perhaps most [visible](#) during a weekday protest organized by SOS Racisme in homage to George Floyd. Days before the Adama Committee's rally at Place de la République, it drew a smaller, tamer, older, and less diverse crowd to the same location. This despite the fact that it was [endorsed](#) by a series of heavyweight organizations: the General Confederation of Labor (CGT), La France Insoumise, the Communist Party, the Socialist Party, and the Greens, as well as historic anti-racist groups like the Movement Against Racism and for Friendship between Peoples (MRAP) and the International League Against Racism and Anti-Semitism (LICRA).

The SOS Racisme rally was focused on George Floyd, not Adama Traoré, and [steeped](#) in the language of old-school French republicanism. Speakers decried discrimination in general but made relatively few references to the actual protest movement underway in France today.

It suggested there's a lot of work to do for France's left parties and trade unions on the topic. In the meantime, Assa Traoré won't be waiting for them to catch up — and neither will the young people taking to the streets.

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P.S.

- “In France, Just Like the United States, We Can’t Breathe”. Jacobin. 06.20.2020:
<https://jacobinmag.com/2020/06/france-racial-justice-protests-adama-traore-assa>

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