

Youth prisons in France : repression and rebellion

Like in every state in the world, France practices repression and incarceration to maintain social and economic order.

These last years, the French state's general tendency is to incarcerate more and more people, younger and younger... So, more rooms in prisons are built, and new establishments to incarcerate people under 18 are built too.

Last november, some comrades were jailed in Toulouse (south of France), accused of having vandalized youth prison administration offices. This is the occasion to give some information about the struggle against youth prisons in France, inside and outside their walls.

What are the youth-prisons in France ?

The french youth detention centers are called « établissements pénitentiaires pour mineurs » (**E.P.M.**, penitentiary establishments for minors). They are prisons for young people aged between 13 and 18 years old.

Built after the Justice reform voted in september 2002 (*Loi d'orientation et de programmation pour la Justice du 9 septembre 2002*, called « loi Perben I »), the first EPM started in 2007-2008 in the cities of Lyon, Valenciennes, Meaux and Mantes-la-Jolie (near Paris), Toulouse, Nantes and Marseille.

All of these seven centres have a capacity of about 60 prisoners.

They were created to replace the youth-sections of the french prisons and are supposed to be another option to the forty-four « centres éducatifs fermés » (closed educative centres), created at the same time, where the young people incarcerated are considered a bit less like prisoners (there's no individual cell, contrary to the EPM).

They were also created to make more rooms for young prisoners, which leaves open the possibility to « create » more young prisoners... These EPM work with educators employed by [the « Protection judiciaire de la Jeunesse » \(PJJ, youth's judiciary protection\)](#).

According to the state, The EPM mix « active security » (social control and guards' surveillance) and « passive security » (6 meters' walls all around, videosurveillance), like any prison, with its special punishment/isolation cells. The main difference with « normal » prisons is that in the day, the minors get lessons, a bit like at school.

A brief history of the repression against the young delinquents in France

Before 1810, it seems like there was no *legal* difference between adults and minors.

Then, around 1810, people under 16 were *legally* considered differently. In the prisons, special sections for minors were created, for the adults and the minors would not be incarcerated together. This was generalized around 1820.

In the 1830's, the idea of putting minors to work (for « learning ») was spreading, which seemed to be better than incarceration...

In 1836, a youth-prison was created in Paris, for minors between 7 and 16 years old.

They were incarcerated in the night, and working during the day (and getting moral and religious education). Good mix, hmm ?

In the 1840's and 1850's, some work and penitentiary colonies for young people were created. Some of them remained open until the 1970's !

Under the Third Republic, from the 1870's to 1930's, the minors under 13 go out of the legal possibilities of incarceration and punishment.

In 1912, tribunals for children were created.

After the Second World War, with the creation of the Fourth Republic, the French state made the legal considerations about minors more precise, but nothing important really changed.

In the 1980's, the French Left were in power for the first time in the history of the Fifth Republic (since 1958), and their « social state » brought more social control upon education, culture, urbanism, and law in general. While talking about « prevention », they brought new tools of control and repression, like *local contracts of security, police*

of proximity, police interventions in schools, etc.

Then, education became more and more linked with the ideas and practices of control and punishment.

As in almost all the countries across the world, it got even worse with the post-September 11 war against terrorism... Lots of new security laws were carried by the right-wing governments, following other security laws voted in the 1990's by left-wing governments...

Today, minors under 13 can't be incarcerated. minors between 13 and 16 can be condemned and incarcerated, but with maximum of length-half the adult sentences. For those between 16 and 18, they can be condemned to the same sentences, with the theoretical possible excuse of the age...

Some critiques of the EPM

Since the very beginning of the project of EPM they were criticized from many points of view. Calls to close down these detention centers were made from the first day of the project, and are growing these last months, because of some suicides of young people in those centres, because of some mutinies in different centres (and presence of the ERIS, - « Equipes Régionales d'Intervention et de Sécurité », Security and Intervention Regional Teams - riot-police forces specialized in the prison interventions) and because of educators' strikes.

Among the critiques :

- Of course, the struggle against all prisons, including the youth-prisons, with anarchist perspectives.
- The youth-sections in the « normal » prisons were supposed to disappear with the creation of EPM, but they did not. Promises, promises, as usual.
- The creation of the seven EPM cost more than 90 millions of euros. This money could have been used in a better way, for education, prevention, etc.
- In the 1970's, other youth detention centres (called at the time « correction and education centres ») were closed because of controversies concerning the incarceration of young people and how being imprisoned affects them. These new centres could be closed again...

Non-exhaustive chronology of the struggle against youth-prisons in France

Since 2005, many demonstrations, gatherings, occupations and other direct actions have occurred, in France, against the EPM.

First, in Toulouse, a collective including different leftist organizations demands more money for education and starts a petition against the EPM. Afterwards, most of the actions outside the EPM walls were made by anarchist/autonomous collectives.

In february 2006, near Nantes, an EPM construction site is occupied by 60/70 persons, who live on the ground and in the trees, stopping the workers until the eviction by the special forces of the French police five days later. The same week, many direct actions occur in and around Nantes. Texts were distributed widely, banners were dropped, posters and spray-painted slogans put on the walls, another construction site occupied in the city (a Bouygues' one, same company that builds the youth-prisons) and a small demonstration went on front of the detention centre for migrants.

The week after, sabotage actions take place on the main construction site and on offices' doors of the PJJ (which administrates the anti-youth repression).

March 25th 2006, near Toulouse, a carnival demonstration is happening, like every year. A part of the carnival shouts anti-EPM slogans, and when the carnival goes near the EPM construction site, around 200 persons leave the carnival and go in front of it, some of them break the fences, sabotage the construction site and destroy some stuff inside, before coming back to the carnival.

March 24th 2007, in Porcheville (Mantes-la-Jolie), near Paris, a public gathering of 50 persons in front of a construction site takes place, with many cops to survey them...

May 2007, many anti-EPM slogans are spray-painted on the walls of the Town Hall and in the streets of Porcheville, near Paris, where an EPM is gonna start in the next months.

June 11th 2007, on the first day of the Toulouse EPM, educators already go on strike for better conditions of work

(more material means and more money).

June 15th 2007, slogans are spray-painted on the walls of different schools near Toulouse. Some schools have their doors « closed » in the night... « *Opening of a new prison... Schools are closed* ».

June 2007, the Lyon EPM opens and educators go on strike for better conditions of work. And a few days later, there's already a mutiny inside... Intervention of the ERIS, for only four mutineers !

June 30th 2007, gathering in front of the future EPM of Porcheville, near Paris.

July 5th 2007, arson attack on the Meaux' EPM construction site, near Paris.

July 7th and 8th 2007, mutiny at the Toulouse EPM.

February 2008, two prisoners escape from the Marseille EPM.

Beginning of February 2008, suicide at the Lyon EPM (in 2007, there was no suicide in the EPM and minors' prison sections, but at least 72 suicide attempts...).

February 9th 2008, demonstration in front of the Lyon's EPM (a few days after the Lyon prisoner's death).

October 2008, suicide at the minors' section in the prison of Metz.

November 2008, the Toulouse EPM's director receives a pie in the face during a « prison national day » conference.

March 2009, suicide at the minors' section of the Moulins-Yzeure prison, in the centre of France.

June 2009, one prisoner escapes from Toulouse EPM.

February 2010, suicide at the Nantes EPM.

March 2010, one prisoner escapes from Toulouse EPM.

April 2010, educators' strike in the Toulouse EPM.

December 2010, suicide at the minors' section of the Tours prison.

April 2011, educators' strike in almost all of the French EPM.

April 12th 2011, an educator is taken in hostage by a prisoner who tries to escape, at the Lyon EPM.

May 7th and 8th 2011, mutiny at the Toulouse EPM, which almost all the prisoners take part in (at least seven fires are started in the EPM). Intervention of the ERIS.

May 2011, attempts to escape at the Toulouse and Marseille EPM.

May 2011, educators and guards' strike at the Marseille EPM, for better conditions of work.

May 16th 2011, a cell is vandalized by a prisoner in the Toulouse EPM. The same day, security guards go on strike, the trade unions call for a blockade of the EPM, for more security and better conditions of work for the guards, and more control over the prisoners...

June 2011, educators' strike at the Toulouse and Marseille EPMs, about their conditions of work.

July 5th 2011, near Toulouse, vandalism action against PJJ offices... Shit and chemical products are put on the floor and on the computers. Anti-EPM slogans are spray-painted and a communiqué left in the offices.

November 15th 2011, some squats and rented houses are raided by the cops, who arrest fifteen persons. Five of them are accused of having participated to the July 5th action against PJJ offices, they are jailed waiting for their trial

to come (except one person who is outside on judiciary control).

November 16th 2011, gathering in front of the Toulouse tribunal, behind a banner « Death to the cops », in solidarity with the Toulouse prisoners.

December 2011, banners are dropped in Toulouse, slogans spray-painted in Montpellier, in solidarity with the Toulouse prisoners.

Mid-december, PJJ cars are trashed and PJJ offices' doors are blocked, in Grenoble.

December 16th and 17th 2011, demonstration in Toulouse (300 persons) and Paris (30 people on wild demonstration), gatherings in Lyon, Poitiers and Bordeaux, in solidarity with the Toulouse prisoners.

December 22th 2011, gathering in Paris, in solidarity with the Toulouse prisoners, against prisons in general.

December 31st 2011, fireworks and sound-system demonstration in front of the Nantes' EPM in solidarity with the prisoners.

And many other fights engaging prisoners against educators and guards, cells vandalized, attempts of escape, etc.

2012, the struggle continues.

Victor Tuva, january 2012

More information about the solidarity with Toulouse's prisoners (translations available) :
<http://pourlaliberde.noblogs.org/>

NB : in February 2012, all of the Toulouse imprisoned comrades (PJJ action) are freed from jail, under judiciary control.