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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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Sender: Mohamad Salimi
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France in a “state of insurrection” as the yellow vests advance

Workers' Struggles France



The Gilets Jaunes (yellow vests) movement in France is at a turning point. In the face of building radicalism, which now threatens the very survival of his government, Macron has changed his defiant tone and promised to “suspend” the fuel tax hike that provoked the movement. This retreat came after street battles over the weekend between thousands of protesters and the police that have left over 200 injured in Paris alone and resulted in at least one fatality.

The organised working class has begun to enter the struggle (although the labour union leaders have dragged their feet), as have students, who are occupying their institutions in solidarity and raising their own demands. But despite Macron's attempt to defuse the situation, the explosion of anger and frustration at years of austerity and inequality has acquired a logic of its own, and it will not be easy to put the genie back in the bottle.

The events of Saturday and Sunday marked the third straight weekend of unrest in the French capital. Thousands of protesters took to the streets of Paris – while the exact figures are unclear, it is certain that over 100,000 took part in demonstrations across the country. This is fewer than came out last weekend (200,000 according to the official figures, which is a major underestimation), but the mood was far more radical, and it was clear that the demands of the movement have moved well beyond the question of the fuel tax. Amongst certain layers of the movement there is an insurrectionary and revolutionary mood. The 5,000 who marched down the Champs Élysées at midday on Saturday were shouting and carrying the slogans “Power to the People!” and “Macron resign!” Many bore the latter slogan on their vests.

Class hatred

The yellow vest movement initially started in peripheral towns, cities and rural areas across France (residents of which rely on personal vehicles to get to work, and thus will be hit severely by a higher fuel tax) and it includes many women and single mothers. Most are low-income workers, including secretaries, IT workers, factory workers, delivery workers and care workers – in short, people who are most affected by rising costs and wage stagnation. These working class and poor middle-class layers are resentful of years of being squeezed through austerity and increasing living costs, and are now expressing a deep hatred of the rich and the Macron government that represents them.

As Idir Ghanes, a 42-year-old, unemployed computer technician from Paris, stated: “We have low salaries and pay too much tax and the combination is creating more and more poverty... On the other side, there are government ministers and the president with their fabulous salaries.” Other protestors, like Marie Lemoine, 62 (a school teacher from Provins) pointed out the pro-capitalist and hypocritical nature of Macron's policy: “We are being targeted instead of the airlines, the shipping lines, those companies who pollute more but pay no tax... Macron is our Louis XVI, and we know what happened to him.”

[Embed from Getty Images](#)

The class character of the yellow vests, and their loathing for the rich, became clear during the demonstration in Paris on Saturday. Acts of vandalism hit the wealthy west and centre

of the city, with storefronts smashed and looted, dozens of expensive cars burnt and the Arc de Triomphe covered in anti-government graffiti, along with the slogan: “The yellow vests will triumph.” The protestors smashed the windows of a newly opened Apple Store (AAPL.O) and luxury boutiques of Chanel and Dior, scrawling “Merry Mayhem” on a wooden board and pinning it to the facade. Of course, there were also some lumpen and criminal elements taking advantage of this situation, but that is not the main character of the movement.

Images of destruction were plastered all across the French and international press in an attempt to weaken and discredit the yellow vests. However, a Harris Interactive poll showed 72 percent support for the movement as of today, unchanged from a fortnight ago. In Paris, there was widespread sympathy for the protestors, and the expressions of anger were seen as legitimate. “I am totally behind the ‘Gilets Jaunes’,” said George Dupont, a resident in Paris’ 16th arrondissement, in *The Province*. “The state has stolen money from the French people. It’s time to give it back.” Assistant teacher Sandrine Lemoussu, 45, who travelled from Burgundy to protest, agreed and said people were fed up with Macron. “The people are in revolt. The anger is rising more and more, and the president despises the French. We aren’t here to smash things, but the people have had enough.”

Police clashes

The authorities were unprepared for the scale of the unrest. There were pitched battles at the top of the Champs-Elysees boulevard and multiple sites across the city, including Opera and Place de la Bastille. Despite turning water cannon, stunguns, teargas and batons on the crowds, the police were overwhelmed in more than one instance as the crowds hurled projectiles on their ranks and drove them back. Frederic Lagache, of the Alliance police union, called for a state of emergency and said “army reinforcements” should be brought in to guard public monuments, to take some pressure off the police.

In some instances, the police simply refused to engage the protestors altogether, as can be seen in a viral video recorded in the town of Pau in southwestern France. The video shows a line of riot police facing down a large group of yellow vests, and removing their helmets to signal they will not attack – to cheering and applause from the crowd. Allegedly, this was not a genuine display of sympathy, but the result of a deal between the local head of police and the yellow vests (“we will stop our demonstration, and you remove your riot gear.”) Still, the footage certainly attests to the confidence of the movement, and the weakness of the police.

Unsurprisingly, the capitalist class are horrified at the protests. Not just because it is bad for business around the Christmas period or because of rising fuel shortages due to spontaneous blockades at depots, but because of the fear that this movement could develop into a threat towards the regime as a whole. Jeanne d’Hautesserre, the mayor of the 8th city district of Paris, near the Arc de Triomphe, told *BFM TV*, “We are in a state of insurrection, I’ve never seen anything like it.” Several regional representatives of the central government spoke anonymously to *Le Monde* of an “explosive and almost insurrectional” or “pre-revolutionary” situation. They also noted that it was a section of the population rising against taxes that sparked the revolution of 1789. One representative concluded: “What is expressed the most is the hatred of the President of the Republic.”

Macron’s hypocrisy

Macron (who was thousands of miles away at the G20 meeting in Argentina), responded to the weekend’s events by threatening to declare a state of emergency, and condemning the destruction, saying he “will never accept violence.” In general, the government has attempted to create divisions in the yellow vests by distinguishing between the “legitimate grievances” of “peaceful” protestors, and the “violent radical groups” who have infiltrated the movement. “What happened in Paris has nothing to do with the pacifist expression of legitimate anger,” Macron said on Saturday at the end of the G20 summit. “No cause justifies the police being attacked, businesses being looted, passers-by or journalists being threatened, the Arc de Triomphe being defiled.” Meanwhile, the Interior Minister, Christophe Castaner, argued that “ultra-right” and “ultra-left” elements had egged on “people who just came to Paris to wreak havoc.”



Macron condemned the "violence" of the yellow vests, but ignored the violence of the state that has left hundreds injured and one dead / Image: PoR

While it is true that there were lumpen and far-right elements in the demonstrations over the weekend, these were marginal. From the beginning, the yellow vests movement has penetrated into very deep layers of society, with Front National voters and middle-class elements taking part alongside the working class and trade unionists. But as the movement has begun to radicalise and the working class imprint on it increase, a lot of the rubbish on the right is being thrown out and the class contradictions within it have become clearer. For example, another viral video shows Yvan Benedetti, former president of the ultranationalist group L'Œuvre française (himself dressed in a high-visibility jacket), being attacked and driven off by anti-fascists within the yellow vests.

It is correct however, that the lack of organisation and leadership in the movement opens it up to opportunist elements. This could be resolved by the determined participation by the French labour movement. But Macron's criticism of "violence" by the yellow vests stinks of hypocrisy given the violent suppression the protestors have endured from the French state. Videos are circulating online of gangs of riot police chasing down and viciously beating isolated, unarmed protestors.

There is also the case of an 80-year-old woman killed in Marseille after being struck in the face by a tear gas canister fired by the police while standing on her balcony, and that of a 28-year-old man who has been left in a coma after a clash with the police. This is not to mention the state violence previously employed by the Macron government to suppress

other strikes and demonstrations (such as during anti-austerity mobilisations in 2017, and the CGT-led railway workers' strikes earlier this year), and the terrible suffering already inflicted on the French people by years of austerity. The yellow vests are the inevitable manifestation of all of the frustration and pain that the French masses have been storing up. They have finally reached breaking point, and have unleashed their anger against the government.

Rank-and-file solidarity

As we have reported previously, the main leaders of the labour movement have attempted to distance themselves from the yellow vests, on the grounds that they "will not march with the FN". But in this way they were abandoning the field to the far-right, to try demagogically to gain control over the movement and derail it. However, rank-and-file CGT trade unionists, in opposition to their own leadership, have sporadically offered solidarity with and supported the movement from the beginning, and several branches (FNIC, UD13, UD31, etc.) called for strikes and occupations in solidarity with the movement against the fuel tax. This exerted pressure on the leadership, who finally agreed to call for joint action on Saturday. As a result, a number of protesters – made up of yellow vests and members of the CGT – marched together at Place de la Republique in Paris. However, due to a lack of proper planning, the demonstration was quite small. Still, CGT workers (some of them in red jackets, others in yellow) were prominent throughout the day.

The breadth of the protests against Macron's tax hike has resulted in a convergence of demands and grievances from all across society, and various layers of the working class have spontaneously entered the struggle. For example, on Sunday, paramedics clashed with riot police as dozens of ambulances joined the protests at the Place de la Concorde, blocking a bridge near the National Assembly. In addition to supporting the yellow vests' struggle against the fuel tax hike, these workers are opposing a range of social security and healthcare reforms they say could affect their services. One protester told *Reuters*: "[The reforms] will bludgeon us financially and destroy our companies."



In Bordeaux, riot police used batons to beat student protesters / Image: fair use

The students have also begun to link up with the movement. Last week, student organisations at a number of major universities (including Montpellier, Nantes and Rennes) called general assemblies to discuss a new government project to increase student fees and the ongoing campaign to stop the introduction of selection criteria for university admissions, and limit access to certain prestigious courses. These assemblies raised the question of joining the yellow vests, partly to promote their own demands – which raises the possibility of a nationwide student movement in solidarity with the yellow vests.

Subsequently, over the past week, over 300 high schools have been occupied and blockaded around the country, including in the southern city of Toulouse and in Créteil in the Paris area. A number of high school students were arrested after riot police were called to the Jean-Pierre Timbaud high school in Aubervilliers in the northern Paris suburbs. Videos are circulating online of police firing smoke grenades at the teenagers, who are shown kicking them back as the police advance. Around 1,000 pupils, many wearing yellow vests, demonstrated in Nice, chanting “Macron resign!” and photographs from a student protest in Bordeaux show riot police using batons to beat the young protesters. In another demonstration in Marseilles, school students were protected from riot police by stewards from the CGT. University and high school students were also widely involved in the demonstrations on the weekend.

A partial retreat

As pressure piled upon the Macron government, at a meeting with opposition party leaders on Monday, the Prime Minister, Edouard Philippe, faced calls from all sides to quell the

unrest by scrapping the tax hike. Marine Le Pen attempted to demagogically bolster her image by calling on the government to end the fuel hike, while Jean-Luc Mélenchon not only called for the “immediate and unconditional” removal of the tax increase, but also for Macron to step down.

The government finally announced today that it would “suspend” the fuel tax hike, in an attempt to placate the protestors. Stanislas Guerini, who on Saturday was elected the new leader of Mr Macron’s La République en Marche, told RTL radio: “we must appease the country.”

While this forced retreat is a validation of the radical action by the yellow vests, it is actually a very minor concession that in fact solves nothing, as it comes on top of decades of rising taxes and further tariffs have been scheduled for 2019 as well. This move is simply intended to divide and demobilise the protests and give the government time to gather its breath and regroup. However, it could prove too little and too late, given the extremely radical conclusions that have been drawn by the yellow vests, who have long since moved beyond the question of fuel prices. This has become a movement about the chronic injustices of French society. While some moderate layers might withdraw, the majority will likely not be satisfied until the Macron government is brought down. Moreover, the movement is even beginning to spread internationally. Protesters in Belgium on Friday destroyed several police vehicles and threw rocks at the office of Prime Minister, Charles Michel, calling for his resignation over high taxes and food prices; and low wages and pensions. These “copycat” protesters wore yellow high-visibility vests and blocked streets in Brussels with pieces of scaffolding, impeding traffic. Whether this represents a genuine trend or a short-term development remains to be seen, but it reflects the fact that similar social contradictions exist throughout Europe.

The problem of leadership

Throughout the entirety of the yellow vest movement, a major issue has been a lack of coordination and proper leadership. There are elements within the movement that resist the presence of “politics” – in the form of political parties or the unions – presenting the yellow vests as a solely ‘anti-political’ phenomenon. The yellow vests have no formal structures or elected leadership, only a number of unelected “spokespeople”, who reflect the confused, heterogeneous political character of the movement as a whole. Some of these are very far to the right, including Christophe Chalençon, who called on Macron to resign in favour of General Pierre de Villiers: a reactionary former head of the French armed forces, whom Chalençon called a “true commander”. However, as the movement

has matured and become more radical, it has begun to move beyond these accidental figures. Moderate spokespeople, Jacline Mouraud and Benjamin Cauchy (the latter of whom has been evicted from the yellow vest movement in Toulouse), wanted to accept an invitation to “negotiate” with the prime minister, but were forced to pull out following outrage from the yellow vests' rank and file, who suspected they would sell out the movements' more radical demands – which include the dissolution of the National Assembly.

A call must go out to the yellow vests to form general assemblies (which a few yellow vest groups have already begun to call for), and elect a democratically accountable leadership that can translate the energy on the streets into a programme of action. This is a call that the unions are very well placed to make, but so far, the opportunity has not been exploited. In fact, the field is wide open to the labour movement to provide leadership and a radical, class programme to the yellow vests. The unions and *France Insoumise* in particular must build on the momentum this movement has created to mobilise a general offensive against Macron. The current policy of the labour leaders has fallen well short of this. The CGT is calling for a "great day of action" for December 14, which, given the rapid pace of events, is far far too long to wait. Moreover, the movement has already seen many “great days of action” and few results – what is needed is a 24-hour general strike, as a starting point for a series of renewable strikes, with the objective of bringing down the government.



A new chapter has opened in the French class struggle. Coordinated and widespread strike

action – unifying workers of all sectors with the youth – is the only path to victory /

Image: Flickr, KRIS AUS67

France Insoumise, to its credit, was critical of the hesitance of the CGT and backed the yellow vests' demands from the start. However, it has also called on Macron to accept a number of “progressive” demands (cancelling the tax increases on fuel, reintroducing progressive taxation on high earners, and allocating 40 billion euros of tax credits for businesses to "ecological transition"), or resign. This is utopian: Macron will do neither, and will instead continue to combine small concessions with repression. Instead of pressuring Macron to find “a way out of the crisis”, they should explain that there is no solution under the present bourgeois regime. The goal therefore can only be to bring down the Macron government, which only represents the interests of the capitalist class. But Mélenchon has not been clarifying the class lines behind the conflict. He has been downplaying the class character of the yellow vests, which he described as a “citizens’ revolution” by a “new historical action – the people.”

But none of the movement’s wider demands can be achieved without working-class struggle, which has the capacity to paralyse the country and leave the government suspended in mid-air, as in May 1968. That is why coordinated and widespread strike action – unifying workers of all sectors with the radicalising youth – is the only path to victory. No matter what happens to this particular movement, it is clear that a new chapter has opened in the class struggle in France, where as Frederick Engels put it, the class struggle is always fought to the end.

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