

French “Yellow Vest” protesters prepare road blockades against fuel tax hike

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The “Yellow Vest” movement against high fuel prices, which is developing outside the trade union bureaucracy, is provoking growing fears in media and government circles of an uncontrollable explosion of social anger.

The movement emerged from social media on October 10, when two truck drivers from the Paris area proposed an event called “National blockade against fuel price increase.” It rapidly spread across social media, and now some 200,000 people say they will attend protests scheduled for tomorrow.

The “Yellow Vest” movement is heterogeneous, made up of small businessmen and truck owner-operators as well as workers hostile to French President Emmanuel Macron’s fuel tax increases. The Macron government has claimed that the tax increase would fund ecological progress, but it is leading to price hikes for consumers and businesses at the pump.

According to the French Union of Petroleum Industries, a liter of petrol was around €1.54 (US\$1.73) at the end of October and a liter of diesel at €1.51 (US\$1.69), up 14 and 22 percent respectively in one year. At the new year, a new tax increase of 6.5 cents per liter for diesel and 2.9 cents for petrol is planned. This is a consequence also of imperialist war policy in the Middle East and notably the embargo on Iran, which has not been offset by stepped-up oil production by US allies like Saudi Arabia.

In addition to the two truck drivers’ proposed events, others are also calling for blockades of roads or highways tomorrow. In total, 500 gatherings are being prepared across France. There have already been trial runs, notably in the Jura region a week ago, called by a group set up on social media. Around 500 vehicles of private individuals, professional drivers or farmers came together in Dole.

This is part of an international wave of protests against fuel price hikes. Recently, thousands of Bulgarians blocked the country’s main roads and highways to protest fuel price hikes, increases on punitive taxes for older or more polluting cars, and rising car insurance premiums.

The Macron government is terrified of any movement that is not organized by the union bureaucracies, which in France are financed and controlled by the state and business federations. Interior Minister Christophe Castaner demanded that “there be no total blockages” and threatened protesters with police crackdowns. “Anywhere there is a blockade and thus a risk to the operations of the security forces and free movement, we will intervene.”

Castaner added, “What is difficult is that there is no trade union that is used to setting up protests that is organizing this. For example, for a protest, you have to tell the police prefecture about it. But now, very few people are declaring them. I call on those who are listening to declare where they will be demonstrating.”

On Wednesday, the government tried to calm rising popular anger with a series of pronouncements. To help drivers to change cars and obtain more ecologically friendly vehicles, Prime Minister Édouard Philippe announced programs to facilitate the buying of used vehicles, as well as an increase in fuel subsidies.

From the Navy aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle, Macron made a few hypocritical statements bemoaning his own unpopularity. “There is impatience and there is anger. I share this anger, because if there is one thing that I have not succeeded in doing, it is reconciling the French people with its rulers. One sees this divorce in each and every Western democracy. This worries me.”

Rising anger among drivers against fuel tax increases is one expression of the far broader opposition against

Macron's regressive policies. He aims to put the costs of the tax cuts he is handing to the super-rich, as well as plans to spend hundreds of billions of euros on a military buildup, squarely on the backs of working people. Macron's declaration that he would have liked to commemorate French fascist dictator Philippe Pétain on November 11 only underscores his violent hostility to the working class.

The money needed for the functioning of society must be found—not in the wallets of people filling up their petrol tank, but in the grotesque fortunes of the financial aristocracy.

Since the beginning of 2018, France's 13 richest billionaires added €23.67 billion to their fortunes, making France the country where the billionaires are increasing their wealth the fastest in the world. Bernard Arnault, Europe's richest man, has a fortune estimated at €65.5 billion, and François Pinault has €30.43 billion. According to economist Thomas Piketty's 2010 report, the top 10 percent in France hold 62 percent of the country's wealth.

Developing a struggle against Macron and the financial aristocracy requires opposing the political forces, primarily on the right, that are trying to intervene in the Yellow Vests protest, as well as the cowardly and reactionary policy of the union bureaucracies, which oppose the movement.

Laurent Wauquiez, the head of the right-wing The Republicans party, and Nicolas Dupont-Aignan of the far-right Arise France (DLF) party have said they will try to join the protest.

Neo-fascist leader Marine Le Pen told *Le Parisien*, “We were the first party to express our total support for this movement, which is apolitical, of course, but which appeals to many of our voters.” She added, however, that she would not participate in the blockades. “The role of a political leader, unless it is in exceptional circumstances, is not to be in the street, but precisely to offer choices on how to solve the French people's problems through the ballot box.”

The trade unions and allied political parties have barely hidden their hostility to the Yellow Vests. Officials from Jean-Luc Mélenchon's Unsubmissive France (LFI) said their organization would support the movement, but that LFI's “ecosocialist” wing opposes reducing fuel taxes—supposedly to protect the environment.

As for the unions, which strangled strikes against Macron's privatization of the National Railways, they are denouncing the Yellow Vests and demanding the workers submit to their diktat. One leaflet on the Yellow Vests distributed by the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT) denounces them as a “manipulation of the anger of citizens and workers by the far right and road transport interests.” The CGT proposed instead to organize “inter-industry struggles that cannot be organized by anyone but our union,” that is to say, that the Stalinists would doom to defeat.

For now, it appears that the Yellow Vests protest will have significant support. For those looking for a way to fight the Macron government, the critical question is the turn to the working class, and the organization of struggles of the working class independent of the trade unions. As in the October 1917 Russian Revolution and the French general strikes of 1936 and 1968, the working class is the only force that can settle accounts with the power of the financial aristocracy.

The way forward is a political and international struggle against imperialist embargos and wars, and Macron's austerity policy. The development of such a struggle will inevitably raise the question of the independent organization of the working class and the transfer of state power to the working class in France and across Europe.



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