

French president bans fuel tax protest in Paris as strikes expand

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As the government of French President Emanuel Macron moved to ban protests against its fuel tax increase, strikes and demonstrations in support of the protest movement spread across France yesterday.

At present, the Facebook pages associated with the fuel tax protests, referring to themselves as “yellow vests,” have defied the government order and are maintaining calls for protests at Place de la Concorde. Tens of thousands of people are expected to take part at the capital from cities and towns across the country for the second successive Saturday. There are growing rumors that railway workers will allow demonstrators to travel by train to the capital for free. They will be met by thousands of riot officers and police dispatched by the government of President Emmanuel Macron.

In a press statement on the protest, Interior Minister Christophe Castaner indicated that he had “excluded the possibility that it will occur at the Place de la Concorde for obvious reasons of security.” The square is next to the US Embassy and the Elysée Palace, which houses the president. Castaner similarly threatened that “the judicial response will be uncompromising in case of trouble.”

The prefect of Bordeaux, Didier Lallement, has issued an interim order outlawing a protest in the center of the city.

The government’s threats have been largely met with anger and rejection by workers in France, in Belgium—where “yellow vest” protests are also taking place—and internationally. Since the first protest on November 17, it has become clear that the movement against Macron’s fuel tax increase was an initial expression of explosive social discontent among broad sections of workers and in the middle class across Europe.

After roadblocks were organized on roadways outside

various workplaces, workers have gone on strike in support of the fight against Macron.

While strikes are taking place at Amazon in Germany, Spain and the UK, Amazon workers on strike at Lauwin-Planque in the north of France joined with groups of “yellow vest” protesters near their hub, where traffic had been affected by a roadblock. Truck drivers honked their horns in support of the protest as they drove past.

After police forces shut down roadblocks outside the Esso oil refinery in Fos-sur-Mer, in the south of France, a strike movement has struck six out of seven refineries in the country.

The Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT) unions, whose leadership is openly hostile to the protest movement and has denounced it as neo-fascist, insists that the strikes have nothing to do with the demands of the “yellow vest” protesters against Macron. Yesterday, the head of the CGT, Phillippe Martinez, issued another attack on the protests, warning that they contained “extreme-right elements.”

“The annual industry-wide wage negotiations opened today. This is a day of action across all the sites facing job cuts,” Fabien Cros, a CGT at the La Mede refinery, told AFP. Nonetheless, Cross was forced to admit that around 150 strikers at La Mede had joined a blockade of around 50 “yellow vest” protesters at a roundabout entrance to the refinery, and were distributing leaflets there. “No product is entering or leaving from the depot,” he added.

Contacted by telephone, one striker told AFP: “We are not against any struggle; everything is good against Macron. We are totally fed up.”

These statements make clear that the trade unions, supported by parties such as the New Anticapitalist Party and Jean-luc Melenchon’s Unsubmissive France,

are fighting to protect Macron. But they are being shaken by the rapid entrance of large sections of workers into struggle against the government.

To keep control of the workers' anger and avoid being pushed aside, some union officials are switching to nominally support the protests. The CGT port and dockworkers unions have declared their support. One official, Herve Caux, explained: "A lot of our workers are 'yellow vest' protesters and the government is indecent. To force it to bend, we have to be together."

On Reunion Island, where Macron has threatened to dispatch the military against protesters, dockworkers joined the blockade at the East Port, while 16 roadblocks were reported on the principal roads on the island.

At the same time, thousands of protesters continued to organize roadblocks across France and Belgium yesterday. They shut down highways near Montelimar in France's southeastern Drome department, in Brittany, Normandie, and in the regions of Agen, Toulouse, Narbonne and Beziers. They blocked multiple shopping centres in Carpentras as well as multiple sites in Belgium to mark "Black Friday."

The decisive question remains to orient the movement against Macron's austerity measures toward the international working class, and to organize independently of the trade unions. Workers face not merely an economic struggle but a political fight against the Macron government and the entire European Union that stands behind it. It is therefore necessary to build a Marxist leadership of the working class to wage such a fight.

As Macron seeks to suppress the "yellow vest" protests and reinstate the military draft in order to promote nationalism and militarism, the fight for an internationalist, socialist and revolutionary perspective is critical. Against the determination of the financial aristocracy and their political representatives to impose their will upon the whole of society, the development of working-class struggles poses ever-more directly the necessity of taking power into the hands of the working class itself.

The "yellow vest" protests remain at present a politically heterogeneous movement. Tendencies of a right-wing and extreme-right character are seeking to influence it. But as the working class enters into struggle against Macron, the right wing is increasingly

abandoning the protests. Laurent Wauquiez, the leader of the Republicans who joined the protest last Saturday, has made clear he will not participate in today's demonstration.

At the same time, certain figures in the "yellow vest" protest have publicly distanced themselves from the right wing, including Eric Drouet, the truck driver who issued one of the original calls for protests on Facebook.

Drouet wrote in a Facebook post: "It is important that every person who wishes to participate in this movement be able to do so, no matter their skin color, country of origin, sexual orientation, gender or religion... No, the Yellow Vests are not the sheep of nationalists, fascists and other extremist movements, just as our movement is not represented by any party or union. We denounce the government's tax on those most in need while it enriches the ultra-wealthy."



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