

French riot police assault mass protests in Paris

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On Saturday, as hundreds of thousands joined “Yellow Vest” protests against French President Emmanuel Macron, riot police viciously attacked protesters on the central march on Champs-Élysées avenue in Paris. Interior Ministry sources claimed that 106,000 people participated in 1,600 protests across France, including 8,000 on the Champs-Élysées.

Police had banned protests on the eastern end of the Champs-Élysées, near the presidential palace. When protesters reached the first roadblocks, they were attacked by police units armed with assault rifles who fired water cannon, rubber bullets and thick clouds of tear gas and assaulted marchers with truncheons. Police then repeatedly marched up the avenue, attacking the protesters or trying to surround them, or tearing up the pavement and restaurant chairs to set up makeshift barricades.

Protesters responded by throwing pavement stones and fireworks; clashes continued throughout the day, as marchers chanted “Macron resign” or “Macron get out” and sang the French national anthem calling the citizenry to arms. Police made 103 arrests. Yesterday, 101 people were still being held in 48-hour preventive detention after the protest.

The Paris police prefecture’s claims that “violent ultra-right and ultra-left networks” infiltrated the march in order to violently attack each other or the security forces are a pack of lies. The police began and were responsible for the bulk of the violence.

The “Yellow Vest” protest was sparked by Macron’s planned fuel taxes hike that disproportionately hit suburbs and rural areas. It has a heterogeneous character, bringing together workers, contractors and small businessmen, who claim to be “apolitical” and to want to build a “popular” movement. However, their growing focus on opposition to social inequality,

militarism and to Macron is striking a political chord with broad layers of workers in France and internationally.

WSWS reporters at the rally interviewed a group of workers from the Paris suburbs who denounced the crackdown. One, a public sector worker, said: “The government’s response, with violence, is not good. This morning they attacked us. I am a mother, I’m peaceful. They tear-gassed us. We arrived, we were at the square, then they arrived, they baton-charged us, they fired at us, we had tear gas in our eyes. No one was vandalizing anything, but they got out their water cannon. I did not expect that, they treated us with contempt.”

Another worker said: “Money rules, Macron is a banker ... He is smashing everything. It started well before, but now we’ve reached the limits. I work at a hospital, and you see hospitals are closing all the time.” Opposing Macron’s planned pension cuts, she added: “A pension is not a privilege, it is the fruit of a lifetime of labor. So retirees have to live with dignity, and today I don’t think retirees live with dignity. All this has to stop ... there is too much social inequality.”

An older worker said, “We regress, regress, regress. Our parents struggled to establish social rights, we are losing everything they won for us. I work for a company and now they only hire temps, you fart once in the wrong direction and you’re fired. Workers aren’t respected anymore, they treat us just as objects, nothing more. It was always going to explode one day or the other, and now it has begun.”

He said, “We should give the ministers 1,200 euros and see if they can make that last for a month. Our kids are struggling, they live at home until they’re 30 because they can’t find housing, all the entry-level jobs are minimum wage in most professions. Thank God the old folks are still there to help them, because by

themselves they don't have the wherewithal. We are totally fed up.”

Didier, a mason, told the WSWs: “Macron he has to resign and scram. We didn't vote for him, it's very simple. That guy, we don't want him any more and he has to leave. He's made for the rich, he's not made for the working class ... I had a back operation three months ago, I had a heart attack, because I worked all my life. He just sits there and collects money while we struggle. The rich get richer, the poor get poorer; we're going back to the time when we were all serfs.”

Didier also denounced Macron's plans for a European army: “These wars serve no useful purpose, they never do. It's like the Vietnam War, the Algerian war. They are dumb wars, with people who think they know everything sending always the same people to get killed: us. It's always the same thing. What did the First World War accomplish? Nothing.”

Daniel, a shopkeeper, said: “I eat pasta, more pasta, then potatoes. I'm sick of always eating potatoes ... The presidents before did a lot of harm, but he is worse than the others. The population is on the street, he will have to listen or else really he is spitting on us like shit. All of France will explode if he continues, and he knows it.” Daniel explained, “My pension is just 480 euros a month, so they have to stop taking things from us.”

The outpouring of demands reflecting the concerns of people outside the top 10 percent of society is staggering the ruling elites in France and internationally. Claims that the protests are just a tax revolt demanding smaller government are a fraud. In fact, the criticisms of social inequality and war reflect opposition to European Union (EU) policies of austerity and militarism that are reviled by workers in Europe and internationally.

Macron's apparently gratuitous attack on the Paris protest is a class issue. As it defends its wealth and privileges, the financial aristocracy is consciously hostile to the workers. Well aware that social anger and political opposition are primed to erupt, they are preparing war and militarism, including the return to universal military service in France, in an attempt to strangle social opposition. The Yellow Vests' demands have revolutionary implications, and a political confrontation between the working class and the financial aristocracy is brewing.

This is exposing the pro-corporate trade unions and

allied political parties of the affluent middle class. These forces boycotted the Yellow Vest march. Instead, the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF), Lutte Ouvrière (LO, Workers Struggle) and members of the Pabloite New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) attended a small protest against gender violence on Opéra square.

Alexis Corbière of Jean-Luc Mélenchon's Unsubmissive France (LFI) party, the ally of the pro-austerity Syriza government in Greece, has asked Macron for “elections,” reprising Mélenchon's offer last year to be Macron's prime minister. This is a fraud and a political dead end for millions of people across France who want to remove Macron from power.

It is ever more obvious that the Yellow Vests' demands, in France and internationally, can only be obtained through revolutionary struggle and the transfer of political power to the working class.

Yellow Vest protesters, whom union officials have repeatedly attacked as neo-fascists, denounced the French unions, who have a tiny dues base and receive billions of euros in state subsidies. Daniel noted, “The unions are paid by the state. They're all paid to make us swallow things ... Then they say a few things for popular consumption, but they tell themselves, we won't do too much to avoid weakening the government.”

Didier said, “I'll tell you what I think of the unions ... For me, the unions are a big fat zero. They don't do their work. They did it back in the day; after the May-June 1968 general strike, if a trade union said, 'We're striking,' there was a strike. But today when one union calls a strike, the others say 'No, guys, let's stay home.’” Didier, whose relatives work at a Nestlé plant in Beauvais slated for closure, added: “I saw this factory, it was on strike. Half the workers were outside on strike, half were inside. That is some work the unions are doing.”

He said, “The unions eat from the same trough as the ministers. It's divide and rule: they are told, sit here, you'll be protected, but make sure things stays under control. We know how they work.”



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