

Rejecting Macron's speech, fuel tax protesters call new demonstrations in France

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Representatives of Yellow Vest protesters rejected Emmanuel Macron's speech yesterday morning, in which he tried to stop the movement by supposedly addressing the protesters' concerns. After long evening meetings with Ecology Minister François de Rugy, they announced that they were maintaining calls for another Saturday protest this coming weekend in Paris.

After 10 p.m., Eric Drouet and Priscilla Ludosky, founders of some of the initial Facebook groups calling for road blockades against Macron's fuel tax hike that launched the Yellow Vest movement, emerged from the meeting and spoke to reporters. They said they were satisfied neither with Macron's speech nor with their discussion with de Rugy.

Drouet, a truck driver, said: "The feeling we have today is that there is no real desire to improve people's lives, that's really the deep feeling we had today." He added that de Rugy's comments were "very vague in the end—he said he would try to pass the message along and that was basically it. We said what we thought about the president's statements to the media, that the French people are not convinced or even worse. It is starting to seriously annoy Yellow Vest protesters on the ground."

Now protests will go ahead, he added: "There will be a rally like last Saturday on Champs-Élysées Avenue. The Yellow Vest protesters want to continue each Saturday on the Champs-Élysées."

Drouet rejected accusations that the Yellow Vests would be responsible for violence like at last Saturday's protest, correctly laying the blame on police aggression. He said, "It was the firmness of the Interior Ministry that created all the excesses we saw Saturday. The fact of being baton-charged with tear gas by the riot police from 8 a.m. to noon created tensions among the Yellow Vests. There would have been less violence

the entire day if police had acted more calmly."

The Yellow Vests' road blockades and protests are becoming more closely linked with strike action at key workplaces, including Amazon, the ports and the refineries, and directly raising the issue of mass anger in the working class against social inequality and Macron's presidency.

De Rugy himself all but acknowledged this in separate comments to the press after his meeting with Drouet and Ludosky. "Their demands go far beyond the ecological question and the question of fuel," he said, adding: "Of course, we were not there to propose immediate answers."

The rejection of the Macron administration's proposals by the protesters and their representatives escalates an unfolding political crisis of European dimensions. After having provocatively ignored the demonstrations for over a week, and launched a violent police assault on Saturday's rally in downtown Paris that failed to stem the rising protests, Macron finally felt compelled to try to defuse the crisis by seeming to answer the protesters' demands.

A major factor in this decision was no doubt the popularity of the Yellow Vests, amid rising strikes at airlines, ports, oil refineries, logistics, and growing opposition to austerity across Europe. A BVA poll this weekend found that 72 percent of the French population support the Yellow Vests' demands for more purchasing power and less social inequality and taxation of working people. Fully 59 percent want the protests to grow.

Macron's decision to give a speech on the Yellow Vest movement to a group of businessmen and union officials only made clear, however, that he intends to pursue his right-wing policies and has nothing to offer the protesters. Insisting that he would not change

course, but would only offer token symbolic concessions, he pledged to maintain his unpopular fuel tax while continuing with his agenda of endless social cuts, military spending increases and tax handouts to the rich.

He declared, “The lesson I am drawing from recent days is that one should not change course when that course is correct, but that we must change methods, because my fellow citizens have concluded that this course is being set from above.”

In fact, both Macron’s methods and his political agenda are dictatorial, illegitimate and rejected by the vast majority of French people, as are similar policies in countries across the European Union. His policies of war and relentless social austerity, which he imposes by mobilizing police to beat up opposition, are now encountering the first serious resistance, erupting outside the context of the trade unions and the established political parties.

Yellow Vest protesters jeered at Macron’s remarks, shouting, “Macron stays the course, so do we.”

Macron’s speech made clear that his government has been deeply shaken by the growing opposition among working people and the mobilization of the Yellow Vest protesters. The rest of his speech was a rambling and incoherent mixture of threats, arrogant lecturing of the population, and proposals for how to strangle the Yellow Vests by associating them more closely to Macron’s manoeuvres with the trade union bureaucracy.

After his riot police units provoked bitter clashes with the Yellow Vest protesters last weekend, Macron warned of a stepped-up crackdown. To any protests where violence takes place, he said, “our response will be public order and only public order.”

Macron arrogantly criticized the demands of the Yellow Vest protesters for lower taxes and greater social spending as being childish and unreasonable: “We cannot reduce taxes and have more public services, day care centres, schools, public services ... So we have to teach people what our system is.” He added, “We must explain to people what their taxes are spent on ... If no one does it, everyone will think it is normal for the school to be free or for the state to pay when you arrive at the end of life.”

In fact, the workers’ demand for lower taxes and more public services is not a childish demand, but one

entailing the expropriation of the capitalist ruling class. The reason taxes on workers are rising while social programmes are being slashed in France and across Europe is that a massive transfer of wealth is underway to the billionaires. Already in 2010, one quarter of France’s national wealth was held by the top 1 percent, and 62 percent by the top 10 percent; today, this distribution is even more radically skewed.

After billionaire Bernard Arnault earned over €20 billion over just the last year, social anger against the financial aristocracy and against Macron, the Rothschild banker and president of the rich, is reaching explosive levels. His tax increases, unilateral labour law decrees, railway privatization, cuts to pensions and health care to finance an EU army, and tax cuts for the rich, are the consummate expression of this transfer of wealth to the super-rich.

Macron also made a vague proposal for three months of “coordination” between the businessmen and trade union bureaucrats he was speaking to, his government, and select Yellow Vest protesters to discuss ecological policy. He also called for closing coal and nuclear power plants and for spending more on renewable energy, trying to present his speech as a serious contribution to saving the planet, though he could not explain how these ecological policies would be coordinated with those of other countries.

In fact, Macron’s arrogant dismissal of popular grievances underscores how not a single problem, including the ecological crisis, can be resolved without expropriating the wealth of the capitalist financial aristocracy in France and around the world.

As president of France, however, his speech made clear his orientation: he has heard the growing social anger and, whatever his trepidation, he has resolved to try to trample it underfoot, resorting to naked repression. The continued protests of the Yellow Vests are an initial response pointing to the vast opposition building up broadly in the working class to this policy.



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