

Strikes and demonstrations shake France

Alex Lantier**1 December 2018**

A growing wave of strikes and student demonstrations, coinciding with the “Yellow Vest” movement, is shaking the government of French President Emmanuel Macron.

While the Yellow Vest protesters demonstrated yesterday in both France and Belgium, thousands of high school students blocked school buildings in France. In recent days, multiple strikes have hit hospitals, railways, and the petrol and nuclear industries. In the lead-up to a second Saturday of protests on the Champs-Elysees today, the mobilizations are intensifying, and the panic of the government has emerged ever more openly.

In Brussels, hundreds of Yellow Vests protested against austerity and demanded the resignation of the right-wing prime minister, Charles Michel. They chanted: “We are the people, Charles Michel, you are finished.” When the police moved to disperse the crowds with water cannons, clashes erupted during which two police vehicles were burned. Around 5 p.m., Philippe Close, mayor of Brussels, banned the demonstration and threatened to arrest every protester in the city center. The first reports indicated 74 people arrested and 12 police injured.

In France, high school students blockaded around 50 buildings in opposition to the government’s university reforms and reinstatement of compulsory military service, and in support of the Yellow Vests. Louis Broyard, the president of the National High School Student Union, said, “It’s not a very Parisian demonstration; it is a revolt in the provinces and rural areas of the high schools abandoned by the politics of Emmanuel Macron. The schools which were blocked today are not those which typically mobilized for this type of demonstration.”

At the same time, numerous strikes took place or were ongoing: in public transport in Lyon and Mans, by municipal employees in Marseille, refinery workers in

La Mède, at the nuclear plant in Flamanville, smelters in Poitou, and many hospitals.

The many thousands of demonstrators who traveled to Paris yesterday from all of France found the capital checkered with police armed with assault rifles and antiriot gear, ready to move on the orders of a government acting as if under a state of siege.

The official justification for the suppression of the Yellow Vests—that they are seeking to disguise attacks on police through an underhanded alliance of the “ultra-left” and the “ultra-right”—is an absurd provocation. A groundswell of opposition of workers across Europe over decades of austerity and militarism is shaking the foundations of the reactionary governments of France, Belgium and beyond.

On the French television news programs, workers have been quoted denouncing the banker-president Macron’s insults against workers, already engraved into common memory: that the opponents of his policies are “slackers,” that a French worker has only “to cross the road” to find a job, etc.

The Yellow Vests are demanding immediate improvement in their purchasing power, an end to the pillaging of workers by the super-rich and attacks on social services, rejection of government proposals for a European army, and Macron’s resignation. This has won them overwhelming popular support.

According to official statistics, 84 percent of the French population say they understand the anger of the “yellow vests,” 81 percent believe that Macron has not listened to their demands, and 75 percent support them. On BFM-TV, presenter Thierry Arnaud called the statistics “catastrophic;” RTL’s Alain Duhamel worried that “the government has lost the battle of public opinion.”

Conflicts within Macron’s crisis government are now openly being reported in the media. On Tuesday, Macron declared that he remained determined to press

ahead with the increase in taxes and the rest of his austerity program. “If I cede, it will be said that I am retreating,” he said, before blandly minimizing the scale of the crisis. “It’s not a major problem to spend political capital, so long as one achieves reform.”

Phillippe added on Wednesday: “Yes, on January 1 the taxes will go up. The president has said it, we have fixed the cap and we are going to stick to the cap... We are not going back on it, one assumes.” This prompted the frustrated remark from a right-wing deputy that Alain Juppé, the unpopular prime minister and social cutter, who was forced to resign following the railway workers’ strike in 1995, was “more malleable than him.”

Yesterday, the concerns were raised a further level. Francois Bayrou, CEO of MoDem and formerly a Macron ally, openly attacked the president, declaring: “At a certain point, you cannot govern against the people.” But this is the only thing the government knows how to do.

The mobilization of the Yellow Vests is the first stage in a far larger struggle pitting the working class against the governments of austerity and militarism across Europe. A class confrontation between workers and the financial aristocracy is emerging. It will be a merciless political struggle. To wage such a fight, workers must have their own organizations of struggle, independent of the trade unions.

Fifty years since the betrayal of the May 1968 general strike by the Stalinist French Communist Party and the General Confederation of Workers (CGT), it is critical that workers entering into struggle oppose the efforts by the unions and petty-bourgeois parties to gain control of the movement in order to strangle it.

It is not difficult for workers engaged in struggle, distrustful of the unions, to recognize examples of such efforts. Suddenly, the CGT, whose head Philippe Martinez has previously denounced the Yellow Vests and declared that it would be impossible to join them, has called a demonstration tomorrow in Paris.

The New Anticapitalist Party (NPA) is seeking to subordinate the demonstrators to the unions. “The social anger that has been accumulating over years appears to now express itself more clearly and radically. Let us fuse the trade union and ‘Yellow Vest’ movements together,” tweeted the NPA’s ex-presidential candidate Philippe Poutou. In short, he

wants workers and youth to be tied to the very organizations which have supported Macron’s labor law and the privatization of the national railway network by Macron, and which are currently negotiating with him over the slashing of pensions and the return of the military service.

The line of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the ally of the French Communist Party and leader of La France Insoumise, is in the same direction. He has called on Macron to reintroduce the fortune tax, but only because the ending of the tax “is setting off a powder keg.” Mélenchon has implored Macron to reestablish “public order” through more “social justice” and, reprising his own suggestion last year to become Macron’s prime minister, proposed a dissolution of the National Assembly and new elections.

These proposals have elicited justified hostility from workers. When Mélenchon announced his participation in the Paris Yellow Vest demonstration in Paris on Saturday, Twitter users replied: “Stay home,” and “You do as Marine Le Pen does, trying to take control in order to better kill the movement... Go back and discuss with your mate Macron.”

The Socialist Equality Party will fight to defend the independent organizations established by workers against the efforts of the NPA, Mélenchon and others to break them. It will explain that the only means for workers to win in this struggle is to construct a political movement aiming at the transfer of power to the working class in France and across Europe, in order to expropriate the financial elite.



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