

# Ex-1968 student leader Cohn-Bendit denounces French “yellow vest” protests

Alex Lantier

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The eruption of political opposition in the working class, in the “yellow vest” protests, is exposing the vitriolic hostility to the workers of what has long falsely passed for the “left.” These forces are hostile to the calls for social equality and internationalism that predominate among the “yellow vests.” Daniel Cohn-Bendit, the leading figure of the May 1968 student protests in France, is responding in particular by denouncing the “yellow vests” for their opposition to tax cuts for the rich, and slandering them as fascists.

Cohn-Bendit’s boundless political corruption exemplifies the drastic rightward evolution of an entire layer of 1960s middle class youth that still play an outsized role in official “left” politics. Having been at the heart of the maneuvers of the student unions in 1968 and parlayed this into a role at the center of Green politics in Germany, France and across Europe, Cohn-Bendit has become a personal friend of French President Emmanuel Macron.

Asked about the “yellow vest” protest in a recent interview with Germany’s *taz* daily, Cohn-Bendit said: “It is a revolt against social inequality that has developed over the long term.” Asked whether he therefore thinks the movement is a good thing, he replied: “No, that is not what I meant.”

Cohn-Bendit nakedly defends social inequality. In the *taz*, he attacks two well-known demands of the movement: the repeal of a regressive fuel tax disproportionately hitting workers, and the return of the tax on the rich (ISF) canceled by President Emmanuel Macron. Macron’s decision to withdraw the fuel tax in the face of mass protests, Cohn-Bendit declared, is “an ecological catastrophe” that must be reversed: “In the coming year the ecology movement and the ecology minister must create social equilibrium so that the eco-tax can be reintroduced.”

Cohn-Bendit makes clear his sympathy with the repeal of the tax on wealth, declaring, “many people I consider to be clever think the ISF did not do much.” In fact, it brought in over 5 billion euros—a sum admittedly far smaller than the vast sums of money pocketed by the super-rich, such as

Bernard Arnault’s record-breaking 22 billion euro pay packet last year. But repealing the ISF clearly boosts social inequality and constitutes an attack on the working class.

Apparently reluctant to publicly base his politics on a defense of the wealth and privileges of the rich, however, Cohn-Bendit instead concocts a reactionary and fraudulent narrative—that his politics aim to defend democracy against the threat of fascism posed by the workers. On this basis, he aligns himself with the fascistic, police state policies imposed in France by his friend, Macron.

“The star of David the Nazis made Jewish citizens wear was yellow,” he says to justify refusing to wear a yellow vest, adding: “José Bové, the great fighter of the antiglobalization movement and radical farmer, says a very large part of the yellow vest movement comes from the *Front national*, that is from the reservoir of the far right, and that he therefore wants nothing to do with them.”

Cohn-Bendit then denounces left-wing support for the “yellow vests” as laying out a road for the far right to take power, like that taken by Hitler before 1933: “The left is making the mistake it always makes: to think revolts that warm its heart are emancipatory. In Germany the left, above all the Communist Party, thought that after the Treaty of Versailles, as protests against poverty spread in Germany, that the time for Soviet-style social relations would come. Ten years later things turned out very differently, as we know.”

The arguments provided by Cohn-Bendit are a transparent fraud and provocation. It is not the workers but Macron, with Cohn-Bendit’s support, that is building a fascistic police state in France. The “yellow vests” have taken to the streets week after week, defying brutal police crackdowns on what invariably began as peaceful protests, to protest social inequality and police brutality.

After Macron declared his admiration for Nazi collaborationist dictator Philippe Pétain, his government is threatening to re-establish a state of emergency suspending democratic rights, and carrying out mass arrests to crush opposition to Macron’s unpopular austerity and war

policies.

Cohn-Bendit's argument that the "yellow vests" protests are fascistic is a slander. The French neo-fascists rapidly abandoned their initial attempts to influence or capitalize on protests against Macron, as they took on an ever more working class, egalitarian and internationalist character. The main presence in the "yellow vest" protests is overwhelmingly that of workers demanding more social equality and an end to the privileges of the financial oligarchy. As in the 20th century, the fascistic forces are driven by the financial aristocracy's ruthless defense of its privileges.

Cohn-Bendit's right-wing denunciation of the "yellow vests" is not a break with the politics of his youth, moreover, but the political outcome of the rejection of Marxism and Trotskyism that inspired the leadership of the 1968 student movement. The record of decades of political crimes against the working class by these forces—in the big-business Socialist Party, in the New Anticapitalist Party, or in other similar organizations—is the product not of Marxism or socialism, but of its rejection by a layer of privileged, petty-bourgeois anti-Marxists.

His older brother Gabriel had met both with the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group that broke with the Fourth International in 1948, falsely claiming that the Soviet Union was a capitalist society, and the petty-bourgeois and nationalist *Lutte ouvrière* (LO) group. LO's forerunners had refused to affiliate with the Fourth International on a nationalist perspective. Cohn-Bendit was marked not only by Gabriel, but also by *Socialisme ou Barbarie's* influence over the Situationist International group, of which he was a member.

These groups' pretensions to offer a political alternative to both Marxism and capitalism were fraudulent. This emerges particularly clearly from the record of the May 1968 general strike, when Cohn-Bendit sought not a revolution, but an accommodation to save the capitalist regime and the position of Paris prefect of police, Maurice Grimaud. Grimaud subsequently recalled the story:

During the great impressive march on May 13 of over 200,000 people, with students and workers' unions, once the marchers arrived at Denfert-Rochereau square, the hardliners proposed to march on the Elysée presidential palace. ... At that point, Cohn-Bendit wisely proposed that we go to the Champ de Mars gardens to discuss what reforms to implement. And he acted this way several times. And so I understood Cohn-Bendit was not the sort of man who tries to break everything.

Looking back on May 1968 in his book *Forget 68*, first published a decade ago, Cohn-Bendit stressed that in 1968, he was not pursuing a Marxist line of seeking to mobilize the working class to take power. Rather, as a precursor of the lifestyle politics of today, he wanted to eliminate restraints on his personal life. "Unlike revolutionaries who are seeking to take political power," he wrote, "we malcontents of 1968 just wanted control over our own lives." He asserted that there was no other viable policy available.

"What an error to think that a general strike could be followed by the taking of power," he added, asserting that a political movement in the working class mobilizing against the "democratic, electoral and parliamentary process is a synonym for totalitarianism." Cohn-Bendit rejected Trotsky's analysis that the crimes of the Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union came from the Stalinist bureaucracy's rejection of internationalism and socialist revolution. Instead, he concluded that these crimes were inherent to any revolutionary struggle by the working class.

Cohn-Bendit's vitriolic hostility towards the "yellow vests" today is a clear echo, 50 years later, of these reactionary, anti-Marxist conceptions. A half century later, moreover, the crisis of capitalism is immeasurably further advanced than it was in 1968 during the post-war economic boom. Unlike in 1968, there will be no reformist outcome to the class struggle, with reforms agreed upon by the state and the trade unions after the strike, and granted to all.

Instead, Macron, backed by Cohn-Bendit, is mobilizing the full force of the French police state against political opposition in the working class. Cohn-Bendit's statements today amount to little more than propaganda cover for Macron's attempt to ram through his reactionary policies against the working class.



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