

Commercy “yellow vest” protesters hold second Popular Assembly

Our reporter
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On December 21, WSWs reporters traveled to the 2nd Popular Assembly held by the “yellow vests” in the city of Commercy in north-eastern France. Over 100 workers, contractors, small businesspeople and unemployed gathered there to discuss perspectives for a struggle against French President Emmanuel Macron.

This assembly, organized by working people against the entire political establishment and the union bureaucracy was an important experience of the international working class. It shows how workers and layers of oppressed people allied to them can take their struggles out of the hands of the union bureaucracies and capitalist politicians. If such assemblies spread across France and Europe, under conditions where a Marxist vanguard provided them a revolutionary perspective, they could serve as organs of the working class to which state power could be transferred.

Despite the media denunciations of “yellow vests” as ignorant and destructive rioters, the assembly organized three hours of intensive discussion on two subjects: the concessions Macron claims to have given to convince them to end the movement, and the perspective for a transfer of power to the people.

The meeting first screened a video that tore apart Macron’s supposed promise to increase the minimum wage. This measure is in fact temporary, carried out by increasing bonuses, and financed via debt and cuts to spending on public services; and since Macron is also still slashing taxes on the rich and offering tens of billions of euros in corporate tax handouts, the concession is in fact unsatisfactory, according to the video. This analysis was widely shared inside the assembly.

A discussion followed of tactical questions posed at the current stage of the movement: whether or not to go demonstrate in Paris, or to send “notebooks of

complaints” to Macron as requested. The “yellow vests” also criticized Macron’s trampling of social and democratic rights proclaimed in the 1946 constitution after the Liberation from Nazi Occupation. Via the proposal for a Citizen-Initiated Referendum (RIC), they demanded the right to impose and abrogate laws, impeach officials, and to modify the Constitution independently of the French National Assembly.

The assembly criticized a proposal from a union official attending the meeting to deal with ecological problems by taxing imports coming from far away, with several attendees stressing that on cost grounds, it is no longer practical to just “buy French.”

Discussion then turned to the question of transferring power to the people. One speaker raised various disparate examples of regional self-government: the Paris Commune of 1871, the Chiapas region of Mexico, or Rojava, the Kurdish area of Syria that has been transformed into an independent zone under the aegis of the bloody NATO proxy war in Syria. Others cited resistance militias in the Limousin region during the Nazi Occupation in World War II.

This raised objections that it would be difficult to transfer power to the people in France, where the state plays a central role in financing public services, based on the example of struggles in countries where guerilla fighters are trying to exist more or less independently of the state.

Alexandre Lantier of the *Parti de l’égalité socialiste* (PES) spoke briefly to underscore the broader importance of the assembly and the support of workers internationally for the “yellow vest” struggle for social equality and against Macron and his brutal repression. He pointed to the need to broadly mobilize workers in France and internationally in struggle, while rejecting attempts to swing the “yellow vests” behind the

political establishment. He said that armed with a socialist program, an international movement of the working class could take control of the economy and political power.

This intervention provoked several questions, as to whether an international struggle is necessary, and whether any socialist perspective exists apart from the record of France's hated, big-business Socialist Party (PS). Several people called for buying food from local organic farmers. This drew an angry retort from a single mother, who said that she barely has enough money to buy food past its sell-by date, let alone subsidize organic farmers.

Members of the PES continued discussing with members of the assembly.

Adam, one of the meeting organizers, told the WSWs: "I was very enthusiastic about the (2017) presidential elections, but afterwards I was disappointed because I knew the free market was coming. So when the yellow vest movement emerged, apolitically, I thought finally we'll be able to express ourselves, I should go over to Commercys and join the debate ... I had been really disappointed, I asked myself, since elections don't work, what can I really do concretely?"

He added, "In the name of capitalist economics, people are thrown aside. It's unacceptable, France supposedly has a social system based on solidarity, but looking at it, you realize that isn't in fact the case, because private profit is ultimately what decides."

Martine told the WSWs she joined the movement because "There are many people who live very badly, with very minimal resources ... I have mulatto children, and they ask me, Mother, why is France like this? And for me it's a real struggle to stay strong and say, no you have to have values and keep them."

She underscored the significance of the international support for the "yellow vest" protests and her opposition to French imperialist wars in Africa: "Workers everywhere are sick and tired of working like slaves."

Another participant, Mrs. Laurent, told the WSWs she became a "yellow vest" because "I have three kids to feed. How can I do this on 600 euros a month? I'm in divorce proceedings, my husband pays me 100 euros in child support, I have to get by on 600 euros. How? No one helps us, everyone kicks us around ... The

Unemployed Workers Center sent me packing, 'you don't have a car so you can't get training, or do this, or that.' The problem is that it's a vicious circle."

She added, "It's Christmas, there's nothing at home—no tree, no decorations, no nothing. My furniture is used, or gifts or on loan because I have nothing. But no one official cares about that." Asked if any trade union or political party helped her, she replied: "Not at all." She continued, "Maybe if all women went into the street and faced the cops, maybe they would give in."

She added that she could support the formation of popular assemblies internationally: "If it could help everyone, the entire world over, why not? It would really have to be everyone, because in any case, in politics they are all totally rotten. There is not one of them any better than the others." She added, "We need popular assemblies, of normal people. We can schedule referendums. And as soon as anything important is on the line, we will be able to say yes, or no."



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