

French “yellow vest” protesters mount pre-Christmas protest against Macron

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On Saturday, tens of thousands of “yellow vest” protesters demonstrated in France, amid a growing strike wave in neighboring Spain and in Portugal, where protesters also donned yellow vests. Thousands of people joined protest marches in France’s major cities, or blockaded highway intersections and France’s borders with Spain, Italy or Germany, to express their opposition to Macron and the European Union (EU).

According to the Interior Ministry, there were 2,000 “yellow vest” demonstrators in Paris, where protesters divided themselves between the Champs-Élysées and Montmartre, after having tricked police into thinking they were marching on Versailles. The authorities had preemptively shut down the Versailles Palace, next to which they stationed water cannons. In the provinces, according to official figures, thousands demonstrated in Bordeaux, Toulouse and Lille, while hundreds protested in Nantes, Marseille and Lyon.

As usual, the security forces reacted with violent repression. In Paris they arrested Eric Drouet, a truck driver who helped launch the “yellow vest” protests on Facebook, alleging that he had a “sort of nightstick.” Another widely circulated video showed a policeman drawing his pistol and taking aim at protesters after throwing stun grenades unprovoked at the protesters.

The mobilization was a rebuke to Interior Minister Christophe Castaner, who last week declared that on the “yellow vest” protests, “It’s enough,” and ordered police to smash highway blockades. After more than a month of protests and violent police repression of demonstrators, however, the movement is still very widely popular. It has 70 percent support in the French public, and various polls say that between 54 and 62 percent of French people want the movement to continue.

Citing Interior Ministry figures—showing 40,000

protesters Saturday, well less than the 125,000 it announced after the first protest on November 17—the French media are all predicting the imminent end of the movement and a return to order.

It remains to be seen whether the dip in participation figures reflects Interior Ministry manipulation, protesters taking a break for the Christmas holidays, or a more lasting move away from the “yellow vest” blockades and protest marches. What is clear, however, is that political opposition and social anger to the entire Macron government and French state machine are continuing to grow in the working class.

The political situation is becoming more explosive. The government has not satisfied a single one of the demands underlying the “yellow vest” protests: for social equality, large wage increases, raising taxes on the rich, Macron’s resignation and the end to police repression. From now on, moreover, everyone is aware of the yawning class gulf separating workers from the union bureaucracies and official “left” parties who were surprised and appalled by the protests.

Macron—who called workers hostile to his policies “lazy” and contemptuously told unemployed workers to “cross the street” to get a job—now can only hold onto power hiding behind the armored vehicles and tear gas salvos of the military police. A helicopter team now stands ready to snatch and rescue him from the Elysée palace, should protesters ever storm his official residence. And any excursion out from the Elysée is forbidden to him, even to the cinema or the bakery, according to *Le Monde*, because it is “too dangerous.”

As his approval ratings collapse further to around 20 percent, the daily added that “The Elysée is now ruled behind closed doors.”

It is ever clearer that if Macron saluted collaborationist dictator Philippe Pétain in November,

after passers-by booed him during his “commemorative tour” of French battlefields of World War I, it is that he saw in Pétain a fellow head of state who also inspires mass anger and loathing. A few days later, just before the first “yellow vest” protest, Macron admitted publicly that he had “not succeeded in reconciling the French people with its elites.” This month, he reportedly told his political advisers that he was the target of the “hatred” of the French people.

The awareness that Macron is hated will not, however, change the policy of the capitalist ruling elite, save to make it more violent and repressive. Targeting Macron, protesters have launched a struggle against an entire European and international regime that imposes the diktat of the banks and the financial aristocracy on the workers. The only way to fight the austerity demands of European capitalism is to mobilize workers across the continent to expropriate the banks and transfer power to the working class.

Despite the manifest opposition of an overwhelming majority of French people, the ruling elite continues to demand austerity and militarism. The Macron government is planning drastic cuts to unemployment insurance, pensions and public sector wages. Pierre-Alexandre Anglade, of Macron’s Republic on the March (LRM) party, declared with a straight face: “This is what we were elected to do, and this must remain our compass.”

From Chad, where he was discussing NATO’s neocolonial war strategy, Macron threatened the protesters yesterday: “It is clear that the most severe judicial responses will be given. Now order must reign, calm and good harmony. That is what our country needs.”

Macron has called for months of “coordination” of policies with the protesters for 2019. Like his promises of a minimum wage increase or his canceling of the initial fuel tax hike, this offer is utterly worthless. Macron has given only crumbs, and in bad faith as well, as it is clear that he intends to take back these crumbs as soon as possible.

On Tuesday, Prime Minister Edouard Philippe announced he was suspending all Macron’s concessions to the “yellow vests,” claiming they were too expensive. He flip-flopped a few hours later amid a wave of anger on social media. But these two 180-degree turns in the course of a few hours showed

that the government’s promises deserve no confidence whatsoever.

The government is cultivating the “free yellow vest” faction led by Jacline Mouraud, who want to set up dialog with Macron, echoing the “social dialog” between the union bureaucracies, the bosses’ groups and the state, or Francis Lalanne, who is proposing a “yellow vest” list for the European elections. Pollsters are already calculating whether Lalanne’s list might increase the influence of Macron and LRM in the European parliament.

For the “yellow vest” demonstrators, like for the entire working class, there is nothing to negotiate with Macron or with the European Union. Rising class struggles in Europe and internationally, as well as the increasingly bitter political contradictions inside France itself, point rather to the rapid emergence and escalation of a political confrontation between radicalized workers and the reactionary Macron regime.



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