

Growing “yellow vest” protests defy French police repression

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On Saturday, “yellow vest” protesters mobilized their first day of action in 2019, in substantially larger numbers compared to the last protests of 2018, despite escalating police violence. Even according to the official Interior Ministry statistics, the eighth weekly protest of the “yellow vests” gathered 50,000 people across the country, compared to 32,000 on December 29.

It refuted all those who cited the dip in the number of protesters during the holidays to proclaim the end of the movement. At the same time, Macron was ordering the two-day preventive detention of “yellow vest” spokesman Eric Drouet, for having gone to Paris for a private commemoration of “yellow vests” killed during the movement; and Macron was also denouncing the “yellow vests” in his New Year’s wishes for having forced him to hear “unacceptable things.” These transparent attempts to demoralize and intimidate the “yellow vests” utterly failed.

Instead, “yellow vests” defied a wave of police violence, in Paris and the provinces, to demonstrate against the government of the rich, which is implacably hostile to their demands for wage increases, jobs, social equality and peace. In Paris, 3,500 protested, in Toulouse and Rouen 2,000 and in Bordeaux over 5,000. In Lyon, thousands of people took to the streets, briefly spilling into a section of the A7 motorway that passes through the city.

While the demonstrations began peacefully, clashes broke out in several major provincial cities due to provocations from the security forces including in Caen, Nantes and Bordeaux. In Rennes, a group of protesters broke a door at city hall.

In Rouen, police shot one demonstrator in the head with a rubber bullet while in Montpellier, four riot police and three protesters were lightly wounded after

clashes broke out, and five people were arrested. Police arrested six in St Etienne on charges of throwing objects at the security forces.

In Paris, thousands of protesters began their march peacefully on the Champs-Élysées before the demonstration erupted into clashes with the security forces during the afternoon and into the evening. The initial violence broke out when the “yellow vest” march, having arrived in the district around city hall, tried to turn toward the National Assembly building. At that moment, the security forces fired tear gas at the protesters, who threw bottles and stones at police.

Blocked from reaching the National Assembly, a group of “yellow vests” went to the nearby St Germain Boulevard, chanting: “Paris, rise up, revolt!” Having arrived on the boulevard, they set up several improvised barricades. Scooters, trash cans and one car were burned, and thick black smoke rose up over the capital.

The other principal event of the Paris demonstration was the entry of “yellow vest” protesters into the ministerial building of government spokesman Benjamin Griveaux, whom police evacuated from the building together with his aides. According to Griveaux, “yellow vests” and “people dressed in black” drove through the gates of his ministry in the afternoon with a vehicle taken from a nearby construction site. They then smashed two cars and window panes in the courtyard before fleeing. The Paris prosecutor’s office has launched an investigation.

Terrified by this event, Macron and Griveaux both denounced it as an attack against democracy and the French Republic.

“The target is not me, but the Republic,” Griveaux said, blaming the event on “those who want insurrection, the overthrow of the government.”

However, he added, “the Republic is still standing.” He added, “This is unacceptable and I hope that the security videos will allow us to identify and charge those responsible, and that they will face harsh sentences.”

As for Macron, he Tweeted: “Yet again, extreme violence has emerged to attack the Republic—its guardians, its representatives and its symbols. Those who commit these actions are forgetting what is at the heart of our civil pact. Justice will be done. Everyone must come to their senses so that debate and dialog can prevail.”

These statements on the “threat” to democracy and the Republic posed by “yellow vest” protesters are contemptible and absurd. The danger to democracy comes not from popular opposition to Macron, the “president of the rich,” but from a government wholly owned by the parasitic financial aristocracy, that tramples legitimate opposition of masses of workers to austerity, war and police-state measures underfoot.

The “yellow vest” protests are part of a broad resurgence of class struggle around the world that marked the past year. Strikes launched independently of the unions by US teachers, strikes of German and Turkish metalworkers, of UK and French railway workers, and waves of protests in Iran and Tunisia all reflected a surge in working class anger and opposition to social inequality. They are ever more openly hostile to union bureaucracies that have strangled the class struggle for decades in order to impose austerity.

Whereas these struggles express the sentiment of the overwhelming majority of working people against policies of austerity and war imposed by the major banks, the threat to democracy comes from the vicious repression of the capitalist ruling elites.

Macron, who now hypocritically claims to defend the Republic, was defending in November the memory of Philippe Pétain, the dictator of the fascist Vichy regime allied to the Nazis during World War II, installed by the National Assembly in 1940 via the abrogation of the Republic. At the same time, Macron is trampling the rights to protest and to strike that were inscribed in the constitution after the end of Vichy.

Despite his overwhelming unpopularity, Macron is still trying to set up an authoritarian regime that would criminalize all expression of real opposition to his regime and to police repression. After the new two-day

preventive detention imposed on Drouet, police have launched a manhunt for a 37-year-old boxing champion who placed himself between police and “yellow vest” protesters in Paris. His “crime” is that he tried to hit police as they baton-charged him and the protesters.

Mass anger is still building against police brutality. Last year, the police forces at Mantes-la-Jolie provoked a public outcry by detaining dozens of high school student protesters and keeping them handcuffed and kneeling, like Resistance fighters about to be shot under Vichy, while also viciously insulting them.

Now, a video is circulating of events in Toulon, in which a police commander decorated with the Legion of Honor, Didier Andrieux, violently strikes the head of a defenseless protester who has been arrested and placed against a wall. Yesterday Andrieux defended this act to *Nice-Matin*, saying in the video that, “I didn’t know” whether the protester still had a bottle. The police could however have searched the protester instead of repeatedly striking his head.

The state is defending Andrieux. State prosecutor Bernard Marchal refused to open an investigation of Andrieux on the transparently fraudulent pretext that an armed insurrection was underway in the city: “There was an insurrectional context before and after this video, in which it was impossible to arrest anyone without violence, and he acted in proportion with the threat.”

Andrieux, who commands 400 policemen in Toulon, provoked a scandal inside the police itself two years ago by beating a police major. Though he had broken his colleague’s nose and brow bone, he only received a light reprimand due to the support he enjoys in the higher police hierarchy.



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