

France's *Lutte ouvrière* group defends unions against “yellow vest” protests

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The eruption of “yellow vest” protests in France late last year outside the grip of the unions has unmasked the reactionary role of the petty bourgeois organizations that have long claimed to embody the “left.”

At its December 8-9 congress, the *Lutte ouvrière* [LO, Workers Struggle] group came up with a statement on the French political situation that laid out its fear of and hostility toward the revolt of workers against the unions, that is to say, against the social layers from which LO members themselves are drawn.

LO's statement, titled “Revolutionaries and the yellow vest movement” and published in their journal, *Lutte de classes* [Class Struggle], admits that the “yellow vest” protests have blown apart the authority of the union bureaucracies, under whom LO has developed its work over a period of decades.

LO wrote, “The striking aspect of these protests is their determination. Those who are fighting for the first time in their lives seem much more determined than all the union leaders combined. The traditions involving protests that the union organizations have taught the workers—like telling the police in advance the route of demonstrations, holding meetings where union leaders no one ever sees show up and say the right word—all these habits simply serve to channel anger behind the union apparatuses.”

Lutte ouvrière explains at length that the habits and organizations LO itself has worked to impose on the workers in fact only serve to strangle opposition: “Even when rank-and-file workers disagree with what the trade unions are proposing or not proposing, it is hard for them to act without them. And so, currently, it is the sections of the working class who are the farthest from the control of the unions that are the most combative.”

By noting that the unions act to “channel anger” behind “union leaders no one on the ground ever sees,”

LO is involuntarily confirming the assessment of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). A break with the union bureaucracies defended by LO is the precondition of all real opposition, and the formation of rank-and-file organizations independent of the unions aiming to unify workers struggles in France and internationally. This also requires building the *Parti de l'égalité socialiste* to oppose the anti-Marxist charlatanry of parties like LO.

LO's cynical line reflects diametrically opposed class interests. While the state and big business buy off the union bureaucracies with multi-million-euro subsidies to strangle the workers, the union bureaucrats making up LO drone on that they are the vanguard of the struggle. After first admitting the unions suppress workers, these bureaucratic Tartuffes pretend a few lines later they are intervening in the unions to advance a Marxist line.

The unions' role in demobilizing the workers, LO writes, “does not contradict the fact that our factory comrades, activists or leaders, fight against the timid policies of the union confederations, discussing and taking initiatives as militants of the class struggle. ... Workers have extraordinary resources, when they get started, they learn quickly. If the organized labor movement could be inspired by all this, it would already be a start!”

This is a pathetic lie: It is the “yellow vests” whose demands for social equality are popular among workers, while LO defends conservative bureaucracies working with President Emmanuel Macron. The unions are empty shells, financed and controlled by the financial aristocracy to carry out “social dialogue” and impose austerity. They are financed by big business to strangle the workers, a reality that is confirmed periodically in the press. (See: “How the French state

and big business finance the unions”)

Thus, the struggle in 2013 against automaker PSA’s [Peugeot S.A.] shutdown of the Aulnay plant, on the northern edge of Paris, was led into a dead end by leading LO official Jean-Pierre Mercier, the top union official at Aulnay and campaign manager for LO presidential candidate Nathalie Arthaud.

Mercier led the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT) in isolating the strike and blocking the mobilization of broader layers of workers against the shutdown, allowing PSA to shut down the site. For services rendered, Mercier was then rehired at PSA’s Poissy factory and “greeted with due honors,” as PSA management wrote.

LO’s claim that the “labor movement,” that is to say, the union bureaucracies strangling the workers, could “be inspired by” the “yellow vests” to become more militant is a political fraud. The pseudo-left group unreservedly supports the financing of the unions by the government and big business, because these forces are thereby financing the privileges of LO members themselves. They then collaborate in plant shutdowns, mass layoffs and the planning of social austerity policies.

The attempts of this nationalist and anti-worker organization to posture as “Marxist” collapse into absurdities. In the name of the struggle against petty bourgeois influences on the working class, the petty bourgeois LO calls for intervening to break up the “yellow vest” movement, toward which it is profoundly hostile.

LO claims that the defense of workers’ interests requires intervening to extract the latter from the “yellow vest” movement, where small businessmen are also present: “In other words, we do not call for ... ‘uniting the struggles,’ we aim to separate them. We want to separate the class dynamics represented, on the one hand, by exploited workers, and, on the other, by small businessmen.”

This policy of division, aiming to smash up the movement has nothing to do with Marxism. The “yellow vest” struggle, driven by the sentiments of broad masses of workers, has attracted many self-employed or small businesspeople, whose living standards are closer to those of workers than of the upper-middle-class elements represented by LO. These more oppressed layers of the middle class, in this stage

of the struggle, accept an alliance with the workers against capitalism.

A Marxist struggle for the political independence of the working class does not begin with trying to smash up opposition to Macron, as LO claims, but by fighting for an international socialist program and leadership in such a movement and establishing the independence of the workers against the unions and petty bourgeois parties like LO. The working class can draw behind it broader layers of the middle class only by demonstrating its capacity to lead a genuine struggle for power.

As Trotsky wrote in *Whither France*, “To bring the petty bourgeoisie to its side, the proletariat must win its confidence. And for that it must have confidence in its own strength. It must have a clear program of action and must be ready to struggle for power by all possible means.”

The alternative to LO’s nationally based defense of pro-capitalist union bureaucracies is the building of an international network of committees of action. In such organizations, the sections of the International Committee will have to explain that the only way to satisfy the demands that are driving workers into struggle is to transfer political power to these organs of the working class.

The author also recommends:

An interview with LO’s Arlette Laguiller: “We’re happy [the trade unions] are waking up”
[9 April 2016]

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