

French “yellow vests” step up protests as Macron’s “national debate” begins

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Rejecting the trap of French President Emmanuel Macron’s “great national debate” starting this week, “yellow vest” protesters mobilized in large numbers this Saturday. The Interior Ministry counted 84,000 protesters that day, the same number as last week, downplaying the size of the protest.

Protesters appeared in record numbers in provincial cities. There were 4,000 in Bordeaux, 2,500 in Marseille and in Grenoble, and 3,000 in Caen. In Toulouse there were 10,000—a record for the “yellow vest” movement in a provincial city—marching behind a banner declaring “We don’t want your debate, Macron get out.”

Police provocations led to clashes in several cities. In Marseille, over 1,000 “yellow vests” were protesting when they were blocked by riot police firing tear gas. Ten protesters were arrested.

On the river banks in Lyon, protesters marching peacefully were channeled by police into an area where they were fired upon with tear gas and stun grenades as they tried to get back to commercial streets. There were seven arrests. In Paris, police carried out 30 arrests.

In Paris the “yellow vests” planned to start their protest outside the Invalides monument around 11:00 a.m. under the slogan “A million people in Paris!” Though the column of protesters was longer than last week, the Paris police prefecture announced that the number of protesters had fallen slightly from 8,000 last week to 7,000 this week.

While the trade unions, who rejected the “yellow vests” in the initial stages of the movement, are now trying to intervene in it, protesters kept the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT) union out of the march. *Le Monde* reported, “at the corner of Raspail Boulevard, a big guy stopped a small group of protesters wearing CGT badges. ‘Put your flags away

if you want to come with us,’ he ordered. ‘The CGT, you’ve done nothing for 40 years and also you called for a Macron vote,’ said another.”

The “yellow vests” in Paris chanted “Paris rise up,” “Macron dictator,” “Macron in prison, (Interior Minister) Castaner in hell,” or “National debate, smoke and mirrors.” WSWs reporters spoke to Frédéric, a construction overseer, and Christelle.

Frédéric said he came thinking “about my daughters, my friends, everyone who is in a mess. There are people who get up very early every morning to go work or even sometime to earn basically nothing and who cannot make it to the end of the month, by the 10th or 15th of the month their bank accounts are empty. It’s unacceptable and it’s enough.”

Christelle said, “I spoke to many people, people in their 50s or 60s... These are people who worked three quarters of their lives and who have very little, have to work while they are retired or who lose their jobs and cannot find another one after. So personally I think of my father who worked his entire life and then he ends up unemployed, that’s unacceptable.”

Christelle declared her hostility to Macron and the “national debate”: “I looked quickly because I personally am unemployed thanks to Macron because my company had to close. And so I had the opportunity to examine him in some detail. Finally, he mainly tells us how we can get by without things. He is not telling us how to solve problems, he is giving us solutions for how to try to get by without having things. But we cannot get by without having cars, without eating, or having a roof over our heads.”

On the absence of the unions from the “yellow vest” movement, Frédéric said: “I had my dose of experiences with the unions. Personally, as an overseer, we’re sort of tired of the unions. That is why I am not a

member of any unions, I am not sporting a trade union banner and I have always said since the beginning of the protests, on November 17, that if there was a union that went in, I would no longer be a yellow vest.”

On media denunciations of the presence of neo-fascists or other forces responsible for violence, Christelle said that this is done so that “people get afraid of the movement and do not identify with it. It’s like when there is violence, there are people dressed like you or me, but with helmets. Well, those are cops who are coming into the ranks of the yellow vests. And if you observe them, staying alongside them during the demonstration, you see they are the first ones to throw pebbles to try to draw others in. Like that, they make out that the yellow vests are violent people. But three quarters of the time, I have seen with my own eyes that they are the ones among the yellow vests who are throwing things at their own colleagues; once the fighting is over, they go back to the other side to see their colleagues and they don’t get attacked.”

On the need to unify the struggle with those of workers internationally, Frédéric said that the media are isolating the “yellow vests” in France: “It’s on Facebook that you realize that many people are talking about the yellow vests and that the yellow vests are sort of everywhere. But that, the French media don’t tell us, on the contrary, they’re downplaying the matter.”

The WSWs also met Hugo, a history student demonstrating “against the overall policy of Emmanuel Macron not just on one individual point but on his entire free market policy that is disconnected from the reality of people’s lives. He called for the setting up of a “citizen-initiated referendum ... because we also have a crisis of political representation, when you see that the National Assembly has 300 people of Macron’s party... We need to return to taxing the rich.”

On Macron’s “national debate,” Hugo called it a charade: “So the great debate, I think it would just be a defeat, yes. He stays on his positions, and I think that is why the movement has to continue and act on the long term.” On Macron’s debate, he added, “I think it’s something of a fake, in that he is addressing intermediate layers, like the mayors, and has not directly asked the population, which he will not meet, and to the people’s ability to decide via referendum. He knows that would blow him up, so it’s all a charade.”

The WSWs also spoke to a social psychology PhD

student who wanted to remain anonymous, and had come to “denounce free market policies that began several decades ago in France. The austerity policies and the slashing of public services have led to the concentration of wealth in a small layer of the population, of which Macron is a part.”

Asked about the trade unions and established political parties, he said: “The political parties and trade unions in France today have been an extraordinary disappointment; they are not nearly up to the social tasks that are presented today. I think the people don’t want them and want to be rid of them.”

On the need to unify workers in struggle across Europe today, he said he was enthusiastic: “I think it would be fantastic if there could be a European strike; that would be really extraordinary because the central issue in this conflict is money, it’s the economy, that’s where we must land our blows. That would be an excellent solution.”



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