

Oppose French unions' attempts to strangle the “yellow vest” protests!

Anthony Torres, Alex Lantier
26 January 2019

Amid a violent state crackdown on their movement, the “yellow vests” are seeking ways to rally broader support in the working class against Macron and the European Union (EU). They have overwhelmingly rejected the fraudulent “great national debate” offered by Macron. The decisive question now is: on which political perspective can the “yellow vests,” and more broadly workers across Europe, fight for their demands for social equality, increased wages, improved social conditions and against war?

Attempts to divert the developing opposition in the working class from an orientation to an international struggle of the working class for power, against capitalism and for the building of socialism amount to nothing more than a trap. This is what Olivier Besancenot of the Pabloite New Anticapitalist Party (NPA) is doing when he proposes that the unions, who are viewed with deep distrust by most “yellow vest” protesters, take over the movement.

Besancenot bases himself on a sign posted by “yellow vest” spokesman Eric Drouet on the “France en colère” Facebook page. Drouet proposes to make the symbolic, one-day strike proposed by the Stalinist General Confederation of Labour (CGT) union the occasion to launch a broader movement: “Far from the government’s siren calls on a great national fraud to silence our demands, call a general strike starting on February 5, 2019. Block everything, no more living as slaves!”

Invited on the BFM-TV news channel, Besancenot declared that Drouet’s call is “a good idea. ... We have to get beyond the glass ceiling posed by the number of protesters. We need a clear mobilization against repression, for wages and the redistribution of wealth. This may be the moment we come together.” He added that the “yellow vests” had “taken a step forward” that

“must provoke a reaction from the trade union organizations.”

It is essential to mobilize workers in France and internationally in struggle, but to do that requires a conscious political break with the CGT and petty-bourgeois parties like the NPA. The unions will not organize a political offensive against Macron. The CGT sold out and strangled the two great general strikes in France, in 1936 and 1968. Now, having lost their bases in the working class due to the austerity policies they have helped impose in the half century since 1968, the unions are empty shells which will not fight Macron.

By calling for a “convergence” between the CGT and the “yellow vests,” Besancenot wants to help the union bureaucracies, that are now financed and controlled by the state and big business, to take over and strangle the movement. If the “yellow vests” allowed the NPA to do this, it would signify the self-destruction of the movement. The perspective of the unions is for a reactionary negotiation with Macron in the national context of “social dialog” with French capitalism.

In fact, the “yellow vest” protest is part of a broad global upsurge of the working class in a rebellion against the old, nationally-based bureaucracies. Like the struggles of tea plantation workers or US, Canadian and Mexican autoworkers, their struggle is developing against the official unions and pseudo-left parties like the NPA. Besancenot, however, is doing everything he can to promote an entire layer of nationalist, pro-capitalist and anti-Trotskyist parties, linked to the state, that the “yellow vests” reject.

Besancenot proposes to “all the political leaders of the left” to come together “in a great unitary meeting Monday to back the general strike on February 5 and struggle together against repression.” He invited “Jean-Luc Mélenchon, François Ruffin, Benoît Hamon,

Fabien Roussel, Nathalie Arthaud, the Greens and the trade union left” to join in.

That is, Besancenot wants to build an alliance between the NPA, former ministers of the big business Socialist Party (PS) like Benoît Hamon and Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the new top apparatchik of the French Communist Party (PCF) Fabien Roussel, Workers Struggle (LO) presidential candidate Nathalie Arthaud, and the unions—to take over the “yellow vests” and subordinate them to a pro-capitalist line.

Such calls for a “social front” bringing together satellites of the PS that have for years supported imperialist wars in the Middle East and Africa are nothing but a political trap. These are not left-wing or working class organizations. They are hostile to the demands of the “yellow vests.” Speaking for petty-bourgeois interests in the union bureaucracy and academia, they aim to negotiate cuts to social rights with Macron in order to align wages with the diktat of the world market.

Besancenot himself virtually admitted this, noting that the organizations that he proposes to rally together have organized defeats of strikes launched over a period of decades. Speaking of the “yellow vests,” he said that they are “an unprecedented, historic mobilization that is not simply against something but that is for something ... It is the first time since May 1968 that we have a movement that is winning something.”

Apparently unintentionally, Besancenot was making a devastating statement on the role of the NPA and its political and trade union allies that have for decades isolated and shut down strikes and protests in France and across Europe. The reason the “yellow vests” have had such an impact is that they opposed with contempt the unions and parties that have for so long organized defeats of the working class. And these parties also reject the “yellow vests,” viewing them with anger and fear. The NPA opposed the initial outbreak of the “yellow vest” protests, declaring:

“We will make no mistake. Like the CGT and Solidarity trade unions, we will not mix our anger on Saturday, November 17, with the bosses’ maneuvers exploited by the far-right, which is not a temporary ally but a mortal enemy. Yes, everything is going up except wages, and the lower classes are right to have had enough with price rises for fuel and in general ... But we

cannot say it on Saturday, November 17, in actions or supposedly citizens’ gatherings that look like far-right mobs, in which we would line up with the deadliest enemies of the workers’ movement.”

What is being prepared is a far larger explosion of the class struggle than what has already occurred. The objective course of developments of the strikes now under way tends towards the eruption of workers struggles on continental scales, surpassing even the great general strikes of the 20th century. Expecting the CGT or Besancenot to lead such struggles means ensuring their defeat.

Developing the political offensive of the working class requires first a conscious rejection of the poisonous offers of support from pseudo-left groups like the NPA. To prepare for the crises that are erupting, workers need to take the struggles out of the hands of the unions. Across Europe they need committees of action, built independently of the unions, to coordinate and unify the struggle against capitalism.

This underscores the need to build the *Parti de l’égalité socialiste* (PES) and the International Committee of the Fourth International as a whole as the political leadership in the working class. It is only through a political and theoretical struggle against petty-bourgeois, pseudo-left organizations that it will be possible to defeat the political establishment’s attempts to take over and strangle opposition in the working class and lead workers struggles towards a genuine fight for the socialist transformation of society.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact