“Yellow vest” assemblies meet in Commercy

The pseudo-left parties seek to intervene in France’s “yellow vest” movement

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On January 26, the Assembly of “yellow vest” assemblies met in Commercy, France, after two meetings of the Popular Assembly of Commercy since the beginning of the movement.

About 350 representatives of various “yellow vest” groups from across France participated. However, what predominated was the attempt of petty-bourgeois political parties linked to the state and trade union bureaucracy to take control of the “yellow vest” movement.

The previous meeting of the Commercy Popular Assembly expressed the explosive anger present within broad sections of the population against the financial aristocracy, the ruling parties and the unions. It was part of the ongoing eruption of the international class struggle, suppressed over decades by Stalinism, Pabloism and the trade unions. Like tea plantation workers in Sri Lanka, US teachers and Mexican auto workers at Matamoros, French workers were mobilizing independently of and against the unions and the entire political establishment.

The Commercy Assembly was heterogeneous, bringing together workers, organic grocers and, especially among the organizers, lower-ranking members of petty-bourgeois parties like the Pabloite New Anticapitalist Party (NPA) and Unsubmissive France (LFI), who hid their political loyalties. Members of the *Parti de l’égalité socialiste* (PES) reporting for the WSWS were allowed to speak. Apart from the live video feed of the meeting on Facebook, the WSWS was the only news source visibly reporting on the meeting.

The class character of the Assembly of assemblies January 26, however, had a very different class character. All the major Paris newspapers, including *Libération* and the right-wing *Le Figaro*, were reporting. In the pages of *Le Monde*, Aline Leclerc hailed the meeting as an attempt by the “yellow vests” to “define together their common values and demands,” organized in a manner that was “very respectful of everyone’s opinion.” *Libération* warmly welcomed the willingness of speakers at the gathering to “build a movement with the unions.”

While the main capitalist media were invited, the WSWS was not. The coordinator in Commercy of the Assembly of assemblies meeting, who turned out to be the NPA’s regional organizer in the Meuse department, refused to communicate to them where the meeting would be held.

When PES members arrived at the meeting anyway, they met another organizer of the Commercy assembly, who apologized for the organizers’ opposition to the PES: “I wanted to defend you, but they have misunderstood you. As I see it, you are only defending the workers. Before, there were many workers in this location, but now they aren’t here anymore.” He added that he believed it was necessary to fight for the interests of all classes in society.

Indeed, most of the workers who attended the previous Commercy assembly were not present. What predominated instead was the nationalist and pro-capitalist policy of various self-proclaimed representatives of the movement, whose ties to parties rejected by the “yellow vests”—like the NPA, LFI or *Lutte ouvrière* (Workers Struggle, LO)—were evident though downplayed.

The NPA organizer refused to grant the WSWS an interview, but the WSWS spoke to another organizer at the Popular Assembly at Commercy. He had worked for the presidential campaign of one of the defeated candidates in 2017, but refused to say which—claiming that it was necessary *not* to unveil his political beliefs in order to respect the “apolitical” character of the movement.

He said, “So it seems we’ve already spoken to you, to your colleague who said that from your standpoint it’s an international struggle because our quote-unquote enemies (I don’t like the word enemy), or at least our problems come from transnational corporations. … An international crisis, well, that’s not in the cards. I will give him the same answer I gave your colleague when he was here: I said that for now we are organizing at the municipal and regional level.”

Asked why the Assembly of assemblies had not passed a resolution against capitalism, he replied: “You’re saying we don’t have a solution, aren’t you? But yes, in fact there is a solution, we talked about it a little bit a while back. It is the question of self-management. … This movement has given birth to something, to solidarity between us.”

This is the line that Stalinist-led unions around LFI have peddled for decades. Refusing a revolutionary and socialist policy—nationalizing firms across Europe and expropriating the banks via the mobilization of the working class—they claimed that workers could “self-manage” non-competitive factories by buying them from their bosses. This almost inevitably turned out to be a financial disaster for the workers involved. Still subject to the diktat of profitability on the world market, the firms typically closed a few years later.

The organizer’s rejection of a socialist and internationalist policy is directly bound up with the rejection of the class struggle by the petty-bourgeois union bureaucracies. Thus, he added, “To talk a bit more concretely, we want to spread the movement. We don’t want to limit ourselves to the class struggle, we want to somehow suppress the class issue, somehow.”

Such comments point to the objective class conflict between broad layers of workers and oppressed middle-class people in the “yellow

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vest" movement, on the one hand, and the unions and political parties, on the other. It must be recalled that the NPA and the main French unions explicitly opposed participation in the movement when it began. Their nationalist attempts to suppress the class struggle, as masses of workers mobilize against the "president of the rich," Emmanuel Macron, are politically reactionary.

Very definite warnings must be made: organizations controlled by these forces will pursue a policy hostile to the workers, and to the "yellow vests." The "yellow vest" movement was not an exception, but an integral part of the international upsurge of the class struggle. The only way it can proceed is by seeking to expropriate the financial aristocracy, in France and around the world, in a struggle against capitalism and war waged independently of the unions and their political allies.

On the other hand, the ability of the petty-bourgeois parties to exert influence over the "yellow vest" movement reflects real contradictions and weaknesses of the movement. The "yellow vests" themselves speak not of the class struggle and the struggle for socialism, whose name the big business Socialist Party (PS) has worked for decades to blacken among workers, but loosely of "the people" and the struggle for "democracy." They also define themselves as "apolitical," citing their rejection of the ruling political parties.

This "apolitical" and populist language has not sufficed to rally broader masses of workers, either in France or beyond, to the tens of thousands of people participating in "yellow vest" protests. But it does allow personnel from widely discredited, petty-bourgeois parties the opportunity to semi-covertly exert influence on the movement.

They represent not the "democratic" interests of the "yellow vests," but the material interests of specific layers of the middle class in the top 10 percent of society, who profit from official financing of the union bureaucracy, academic research and the media. Their attempts to posture as defenders of the "yellow vest" against the Marxist-Trotskyist line of the PES are cynical and false. They are acting to take over the movement and subordinate it to the unions and to the capitalist ruling class.

For now, the NPA, LFI and LO have profited from the fact that for decades they have suppressed the class struggle and subordinated it to an alliance with the PS. This helped create a disoriented atmosphere in which masses of people falsely associated socialism with the austerity policies and imperialist wars of the PS and other European social-democratic parties. Despite Macron's brutal police violence against "yellow vest" protesters, the latter do not have a clear revolutionary perspective against him.

Thus, the WSWS spoke to a British youth at the meeting, who said he has friends in Britain's "extra-parliamentary left" and has joined a "yellow vest" group in the Paris area led by a Stalinist official who joined LFI, José Espinosa. When the WSWS asked him how workers could fight the militarism and austerity of the European Union without an international, revolutionary strategy, he replied: "It's a good question. I don't know. I don't think things are necessarily being posed at this level yet. I think maybe what's happening at this moment is we're still living in the kind of aftermath of these few riots that happened in Paris."

While he saluted the supposedly democratic character of the Assembly of assemblies, he gave the following report: "A lot of the assembly meeting turned around the question of whether people had the right or the mandate to represent their local assemblies, because they were delegations that came from all over the country. ... After about two hours of a discussion about demands and all of these kinds of things, the moment the vote arrived everyone suddenly realized that they didn't have a decisional power in the assembly. So that was quite interesting."

The temporary coexistence in the "yellow vest" movement of thousands of workers with the lower-ranking members of the petty-bourgeois pseudo-left reflects the initial stage of the development of the class struggle. But Macron and the international banks who stand behind him will give workers nothing on purchasing power, or anything else; they will accelerate austerity and war. A vast international upsurge in the working class is proceeding, which will shatter the pseudo-left's attempts to suppress the class struggle via appeals to nationalism.

The pseudo-left's capacity for now to intervene in and monopolize organizations set up in struggle against Macron does not refute the PES's assessment that the creation of independent organizations is a necessary step. Ultimately, the difficulty is not that the "yellow vests" have tried to set up such organizations, but one of political perspective. For now, political issues are not clear enough to the masses in struggle for them to consciously reject and oppose the influence of petty bourgeois parties hostile to their movement.

This raises above all the question of building of the PES itself. It has explained that the forming of organizations like the Commercy Popular Assembly paves the way for international revolutionary struggle by the working class. An international network of such organizations, independent from the nationally based unions, could allow workers to seize the means of production and transfer political power to their assemblies. They would thus renew the traditions of the October 1917 revolution, rejected by Stalinism and Pabloism.

In the coming class struggles, in France and internationally, masses of workers will go through bitter experiences with the reactionary role of the pseudo-left parties. The decisive issue to bring these struggles to fruition will be the construction of the PES and other sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) around the world—to orient workers to the international class struggle and overcome the anti-revolutionary role of the union bureaucracies and pseudo-left groups.

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