# The CGT's "national strike": French unions seek to strangle the "yellow vest" protests

**Our reporters**
**9 February 2019**

On February 5, the CGT trade union federation called a "national 24-hour strike" and joint day of action with "yellow vest" protests. Tens of thousands of people participated across the country.

The day of action had a contradictory character. On the one hand, the unions were not seeking to mobilize workers against Macron or the European Union. In workplaces where they had a presence, they did nothing to mobilize workers for a strike. It was, for the union apparatus, an opportunity to mobilize its base of officials and bureaucrats to meet with "yellow vest" protesters, toward whom the unions are hostile, and seek to take control of their movement.

Thousands of people nonetheless rallied in numerous cities: Lille (2,300 according to police), Rouen (3,200), Le Havre, (2,200), Caen (2,300), Nantes (2,400), Angers (1,500), Clermont-Ferrand (2,300), Strasbourg (1,500), Lyon (4,300), Avignon (2,000), Marseille (5,200), and Paris (18,000). Workers joined "yellow vest" protests on roundabouts and roadblocks throughout France.

In Paris, the head of the CGT, Philippe Martinez, as well as Unsubmissive France's (UF) Jean-luc Melenchon and Alexis Corbière, attended the rally. The union apparatuses and their political allies hoped that all would be forgotten of their earlier denunciations of the "yellow vest" movement as right-wing and neo-fascist when it began. Corbière declared it was "logical that the unions be there with the yellow vests to tell the government: stop these policies."

While reaffirming the pretexts for his initial denunciation of the "yellow vests," Martinez couched them in more subtle terms: "We do not mix with people who hold racist, sexist or homophobic positions, but it's a minority. We have learned to recognize each other."

Having recovered from their initial panic in the face of protests that emerged outside of their control, the political and trade union representatives of French imperialism are now working to influence the movement. But the unions are actively negotiating austerity attacks—and Mélenchon the introduction of compulsory military service—with Macron. Their aim can only be to impose a reactionary program on the "yellow vests." The decisive question is to mobilize ever-broader layers of workers, in France and internationally, independently of the unions and political forces like UF.

In effect, a class gulf separates the demands of the protesters from the political and union apparatuses that represent the French ruling class.

In Paris, where police attacked "yellow vests" at the conclusion of the demonstration, the WSWS interviewed protesters.

Sabine, a personal care worker, said she was demonstrating because there is "too much tax and not enough wages. Like usual, the situation has not improved over two months, but has even gotten worse." She labelled Macron's offer of a "grand national debate" as a "huge smokescreen."

She spoke of the difficulties at her work: "We have an employer that takes everything, and the employees who do the work are paid nothing. I am on 1,250 euros a month and I work in an office. My colleagues who go out on home visits are on the minimum wages, 1,200 euros, and they have to have their own cars. They aren't allowed to take the freeway—our contract prohibits it—so they are constantly losing time and money. They try to get compensated for travelling 15 kilometers but are reimbursed for only 12."

Sabine added, "They are on their own and tired from their workday, they have 44 hours of care without

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counting travel time of an hour and a half per day. The worst is that they're told, 'we will pay you for overtime at the end of the year, based on total number of hours worked.' Then two or three months before, they're put on leave in order not to pay them. And when they're paid at the end of the year, it's forgotten that in one week they worked 42 hours—all that is forgotten."

Asked whether the trade unions have assisted her, Sabine replied, "not at all." She said that the unions were "not in solidarity" with the "yellow vests," but had "missed the boat."

"Maybe they believed that we were fascists," she said. "But if they had come to see us, they could easily have seen that everyone is here: Portuguese, people with dark skin, Arabic people. Where are the fascists? It doesn't make any sense. On my mother's side, we're Jewish. So, are we anti-Semites? It disgusts me. If one day a single person accused me of being an anti-Semite, I would file charges against them."

Sabine also criticized Macron's policies, demanding the re-imposition of the fortune tax. "We are told that there is no money. It's nonsense." Referring to Macron's military service, she added, "That will be his police to protect all his oligarchs."

The WSWS also spoke to Dzipomariam and Anthony, who attended to protest against inequality. "We are one of the richest countries, but we can't even make it to the end of the month," Anthony noted. "And what do they do? They think we should tax the poor when they could tax the rich, for example. The fortune tax could be re-established simply."

Speaking on the trade unions, he said: "For us, they're citizens like anyone else, so we take all the help we can get." But they added that the Labor Law and the destruction of the railway workers' employment code, negotiated with the unions, were "awful," as were the criticisms of the "yellow vests" by the CGT's Martinez. Anthony added that the unions had "followed" the "yellow vests," and "I'm being polite."

The WSWS spoke to Vincent, recently retired from the public service, who said, "We've had enough of Macron. I voted for him against Le Pen, so I'm not really surprised. But I'm still surprised by the shift made by a president claiming to be different. They used us, but now we've got the idea."

Vincent criticized the questions that Macron used to launch the "grand national debate" about the movement: "What should we cut? Healthcare or education? That's nonsense; that's not what ordinary people are talking about. They're not saying cut, we have to organize things differently and make the choice over different priorities… It's not a question of cutting the public services; we have to improve the public services."

He also indicated his distrust toward Macron's intervention to impose a new president in Venezuela. "I don't take Maduro as a great democrat," he said. "The situation of the country appears totally dramatic considering that was the largest petrol producer, so clearly they have money. But that being said, it's complete interference to support the head of the assembly, who has no more legitimacy than the person he is contesting against."

Finally, Vincent called for "the re-establishment of the fortune tax. There is money. There are plenty of people with money. There are corporations in the top 40 who are making profits. So, no one is going to tell me there's no money. There is; we just have to go and get it."

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