Sixteenth week of protests: French “yellow vests” support strikes in North Africa

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The 16th weekly protest of the “yellow vests” in France took place amid an international strike wave across the Maghreb. Protests are shaking Algeria, where hundreds of thousands are demonstrating against President Abdelaziz Bouteflika’s attempt to run for a fifth term. And on the other side of the Mediterranean, 39,300 “yellow vests,” according to a police count, protested against President Emmanuel Macron, two weeks ahead of the major “yellow vest” protest called for March 16, to coincide with Macron’s fraudulent “great national debate.”

An association of Policemen Who’ve Had Enough challenged the Interior Ministry’s figures, saying that 200,000 “yellow vests” had protested; the “yellow vests” themselves claimed 92,000.

Clashes broke out from the beginning of the “yellow vest” protest in Nantes, where protesters from across the region had been asked to converge. Around 2 p.m., around 1,000 protesters marched together, but the police forces blocked them and fired heavy volleys of tear gas.

In Bordeaux, several thousand marchers demonstrated peacefully. The city’s train station was briefly occupied by the protesters, who set up a banner proclaiming, “On March 16, Aquitaine will invade Paris, ultimatum season 2.”

In Toulouse, one of the cities which has seen the most “yellow vest” protests, after protesters marched peacefully for several hours, clashes later broke out with police. On large avenues around the historic centre of town, the police forces mobilized a water cannon after initially firing volleys of tear gas to disperse the protesters.

In Lyon, around 2,000 people took to the streets for a demonstration that organisers said would be region-wide, and which led to several clashes with the security forces. In Marseille, 2,000 people protested alongside members and officials of the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT) union.

While Macron had threatened to deploy the army to the island early on in the “yellow vest” movement, a hundred people demonstrated in Saint Paul on Réunion island, marching up the Chaussée Royale.

In Lille, a “regional and international” rally brought together “yellow vests” and protesters from other countries, including Belgium and the Netherlands. Press reports said that around 3:30 p.m. the police forces started firing heavy volleys of tear gas at the protesters. Women dressed as Marianne, the national symbol, topless with red vests and tape over their mouths, also attended the protests.

In Paris, 4,000 protesters left the Arc de Triomphe, the organisers of the “Yellow Vest Week 16: Insurrection” and “Week 16, We Take over Paris” called for “blockading the Arc of Triumph square as long as possible” in the west of the city. Shortly after 10 a.m., “yellow vest” protesters with signs began to gather on the Champs-Elysées. At the end of the afternoon, the police used water cannon to disperse the protesters.

The WSWS spoke to Anaïs and Vincent, who explained why they were “yellow vests.”

“The increase in fuel costs, we really felt it," Vincent explained. "I spend three hours in my car to do the commute back and forth to work. In terms of voting rights and things like that, we have the presidential elections, but from my point of view that was pretty limited because we don’t really have a choice anymore. We were literally stuck between Macron the free-marketeer or Le Pen,” the neo-fascist candidate.

On police repression, Anaïs said: “We are not going to give up protesting, there are clashes and excesses

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unfortunately, but we can't do anything about that. But above all we cannot give up or hand a victory to the state, because it's still not clear whether they've agreed to what we want. Macron tries to win time, but he doesn't listen to us. I think if the situation stays as is, the protests will continue, week after week. As long as there are no real solutions and just words, week after week we will continue to protest."

Vincent dismissed accusations in the media and the political establishment that the "yellow vests" are anti-Semitic: "They are already setting up traps to try to discredit us. It's easier, to do what has been done for the last 40 years in France. If someone thinks differently you call him a Nazi, a nasty anti-Semite, or they will come up with a new insult in the next couple weeks. They seem to have toned down the anti-Semitism accusations over the last week, but then it will be homophobia or anti-Islam, or whatever. That is their game."

Anaïs also said that the unions are controlled by the state: "Normally, we see many people who come with CGT armbands. But for a long time they have accepted the policy of the government, they say nothing, accept things, and stay in their comfortable position. There were a few times when there were debates between unions and the bosses to know if they could reach an agreement. But they didn't find one, so as if by coincidence, the government came in and now it will decide."

On the events in Algeria, Anaïs and Vincent said they support the demonstrators. "They are stuck in a system where Bouteflika is 82 and things haven't changed in 40 years," Anaïs said. "Of course, after a while, people want to lift up the veil and see what's under it. And they are right to want to fight. If that is what they're fighting for, it's right to do it."

WSWS reporters also met a man from Marseille who wanted to remain anonymous, but who said he had come "in a personal capacity." He said, "I'm here because we have a president who doesn't listen, who was elected but with in fact a very small percentage of the French population voting for him. So, he tells himself he has legitimacy, but I don't think he has it today. I'm there above all because prices are surging, so that's also an issue everyone is raising."

On Macron's proposals for a law banning opposition to Zionism in response to the "yellow vest" protests, he said: "There are many people among us who are from the Jewish, Muslim communities and were here from the beginning. It's always to discredit the movement. They want that …

"I find that the media today serve the interest of the government. Marine Le Pen is not behind us, there is no Jean-Luc Mélenchon behind us either. It is an apolitical movement, today above all we want the government to leave."

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