

Macron to deploy French army against “yellow vest” protests

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After Wednesday’s meeting of the council of ministers, French government spokesman Benjamin Griveaux announced that President Emmanuel Macron would activate army units during this weekend’s “yellow vest” protests. This is the first time since the 1954–1962 war in Algeria that the army is to be mobilized in police operations on French soil against the population.

Griveaux announced that the operation would have the task of “securing fixed and static points in conformity with their mission, that is to say principally the protection of official buildings.” He justified his recourse to the armed forces by claiming this was necessary to allow the police forces to “concentrate on protest movements and on the maintenance and re-establishment of public order.”

Today, Defense Minister Florence Parly is slated to meet representatives of the police forces in the late afternoon to discuss operational details on the upcoming deployment this Saturday.

The mobilization of army units comes on top of a series of repressive measures the government announced on Tuesday. These include allowing the state to ban protests if “radicals” attend them, increasing fines for participating in a banned protest from 38 to 135 euros, the setting up of “anti-hooligan brigades” of police, the use of drones, the firing of chemical agents allowing police to trace demonstrators, and the use of police checkpoints to stop and identify demonstrators.

The resort to the French army to threaten protests against social inequality marks a historical turning point of international significance. A wave of strikes and protests is spreading across the world, driven by mounting political anger at decades of austerity and militarism. These range from protests by the “yellow

vests” to strikes against decade-long wage freezes across Europe, to the mass protests against the Algerian military dictatorship, to the strikes of US teachers and Mexican *maquiladora* workers and mass strikes in Sri Lanka and India.

Macron’s decision to deploy the army against the “yellow vests” is part of the increasingly desperate attempts of the ruling class internationally to intimidate the rising political opposition among workers and, failing that, to create conditions to try to repress it through force of arms.

The government is deploying the army amid the media frenzy that followed the looting of the Champs-Élysées avenue in Paris during last Saturday’s “yellow vest” protests. But there is no hard evidence that “yellow vest” protesters carried out this looting. Top officials, including Paris mayor Anne Hidalgo, have said these actions were committed by far-right groups who exploited a breakdown in the chain of command of the police forces, some of whom were filmed joining in the looting of shops on the Champs-Élysées.

Despite the murkiness of Saturday’s events, the government is responding by rapidly stepping up threats against protesters. Interior Minister Christophe Castaner brazenly declared that on Saturday, police were facing “10,000 hooligans,” implying that the vast majority of peaceful “yellow vest” protesters were violent criminals whom police could treat as such. Speaking about the violence on Saturday, Macron for his part provocatively declared that supporters of the “yellow vest” movement “have made themselves complicit in it.”

The looting Saturday is only a pretext for the implementation of plans that have been long prepared. A possible resort to the army inside France has been publicly discussed for several years, since the then-

ruling Socialist Party (PS) began calling for dispatching the army to working class districts of Marseille and other cities under President François Hollande.

The use of troops to crack down on domestic political opposition underscores the correctness of the WSWs's long-standing opposition to fraudulent claims that the "war on terror" launched by Washington and its European allies aims to protect the people. The PS began Operation Sentinel under the state of emergency it declared after the Nov. 13, 2015, terror attacks in Paris, perpetrated by Islamist networks the NATO powers were using in the Syrian war. Now Macron, a former minister in the PS government, is using these supposedly "anti-terror" troops to reinforce the mobile police squads he is throwing against the "yellow vests."

Sensing itself to be deeply isolated and despised by workers internationally, and terrified by rising protests in both France and Algeria, the financial aristocracy intends to wage ruthless class war. A February article in the *Monde diplomatique* titled "Class struggles in France" pointed to the panic seizing broad sections of the ruling class amid the growing political opposition that is for now largely peaceful but also very deep in the French and international working class.

The monthly wrote, "Fear, not of losing an election, or failing to 'reform', or to take stock market losses. But of insurrection, of revolt, of destitution. For a half century, the French elites had not experienced such a feeling. ... The director of a polling institute mentioned for his part 'big CEOs who were indeed very worried,' and an atmosphere 'that resembles what I have read about 1936 or 1968' (the two French general strikes). There is a moment where they tell themselves, we have to be able to spend a lot of money to avoid losing what is essential."

And so the financial aristocracy is pouring resources into repression and breaking with longstanding guarantees that the army would not be sent to fire on the population. After former PS presidential candidate Ségolène Royal called for sending the army to Marseille in 2013, history professor Jean-Marc Berlière reviewed the history of the French army's use for police operations in an interview in *Le Monde*.

In the 19th century, Berlière explained, the army's repeated murder of workers, including women and children, during strikes and May Day rallies provoked enormous class anger: "Massacres like those that

periodically took place—at Fourmies, Narbonne, and so on—seriously hurt its image, which was already badly damaged by suspicion of social and political collusion due to its engagement during strikes on the side of the employers."

After the October 1917 Revolution in Russia during World War I, which saw mass mutinies in the French army, the government decided it could no longer trust the army for domestic policing. "After the victory and the sacrifices of the 1914–1918 war, it was no longer possible to use the victorious army for internal operations," Berlière said. Asked whether the French army was active after World War I in domestic policing inside the borders of current-day France, he added: "Basically, no. The political risk was too great: what would be the attitude of the conscripts?"

After the army's infamous resort to mass torture and murder in a failed attempt to keep Algeria under French rule during the 1954–1962 independence war, Macron is again turning to the army. His hailing last year of Nazi-collaborationist dictator Philippe Pétain as well as Georges Clemenceau—who as interior minister before World War I oversaw army operations leading to the murder of 18 workers—reflect continuous official attempts to legitimize repression.

This underscores the reactionary character of continuous proclamations from within the political establishment that left-wing, socialist and working-class politics are irrelevant and dead. They create conditions where a deployment of the army against working people, lacking any shred of legitimacy, proceeds without meaningful opposition in official French life. The central task, in which the "yellow vest" protests mark an initial step, is to independently mobilize the growing political opposition in the working class against this drive to military-police dictatorship.



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