

French “yellow vest” protests defy threat of army repression

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Despite “yellow vest” protesters’ anger at French officials’ threats to have the army fire on them, their marches on Saturday overall unfolded peacefully and without violent incidents. On Friday morning, the military governor of the Paris area, General Bruno Le Ray, had said that soldiers deployed to confront the “yellow vests” would have “different means for action faced with all types of threats. That can go as far as opening fire.”

Ultimately, there were no confrontations between the army and the “yellow vests” this weekend, or soldiers opening fire on protesters. It was the police forces that committed the only major act of violence that marred the weekend. In Nice, they violently charged and beat over the head a 73-year-old woman who was not threatening the police forces, as footage from several video surveillance cameras has confirmed. She has been hospitalized with subdural hematomas and was reportedly for a time in a coma.

“The police prefect has given the hospital very firm instructions not to communicate with the exterior, including with the family, who finds it very difficult to obtain information,” said Arié Alimi, the lawyer for the victim’s family. The family intends to bring a lawsuit against police for “voluntary violence by individuals disposing of state authority on vulnerable persons.” The daughter of the victim raised the question of the president’s responsibility, stressing that police are under no obligation to “obey the orders of a little king.”

The “Yellow Number” Facebook page announced that there had been 123,000 “yellow vest” protesters in many cities across France. The Interior Ministry announced the absurd figure of 8,100 protesters across France, before changing its estimate to over 40,000.

The largely peaceful unfolding of the “yellow vest” demonstrations raises again serious questions on the

role of the security forces in the violence on March 16. Hundreds of unidentified violent protesters pillaged dozens of shops or stores on the Champs Elysées avenue. The media and parties of the political establishment immediately reacted hysterically. The Macron government claimed that the violence of March 16 was carried out by hardened, far-left violent protesters who were unidentified but enjoyed the complicity of the “yellow vests.”

The government had announced the mobilization of the army as well as numerous measures including bans on protesting, raising fines for illegal protests from €38 to €115, mobilizing “anti-hooligan brigades” and the use of drones. Bans on protests hit Paris neighborhoods like the Champs Elysées, where the fighting had taken place on March 16, Capitole Square in Toulouse, where the protests have been strong, as well as neighbourhoods in Bordeaux. Nice and Marseille were also hit by protest bans.

The hardened violent protesters the government blamed for the violence, without identifying or arresting them, did not appear at all this weekend. This strongly raises again the question of the identity of the elements that carried out the pillage on March 16, particularly given that elements of the riot police were videoed participating in the pillage. The suspicion still remains that forces inside the state could have given their agreement, at least tacitly, to a provocation.

The threats of deadly violence that Macron and Le Ray were effectively making against the “yellow vests” come after four months of protests in France but only two weekends after mass protests began by Algerian workers and youth to bring down the Algerian government. The emergence of an international movement with revolutionary aspirations terrifies the French ruling class. Fearing the overthrow of General

Abdelaziz Bouteflika's regime, they are willing to turn to anyone to strangle the protests against the Macron regime in France.

WSWS reporters spoke to "yellow vests" at Saturday's protests in Paris. Asked about the advisability of the presence of army units around the Paris protests, one "yellow vest" explained to the WSWS: "As far as I see, I don't think the media and the military will come together to practice shooting civilians. It's impossible, unimaginable. But given the orders that exist today, coming from the Interior Ministry and the current government, it is possible that the soldiers could in fact shoot civilians at point blank range if there are problems."

About the violent criminals, he said that they "show up to try to blend in 'yellow vest' protests. That everybody knows and sees, including the police. But we can't stop them because they come in large numbers, usually. We speak to them and they say: 'We have a right to protest and to do what we want, so there, people should not be left by themselves to decide how to handle this problem.'"

About General Le Ray's threat to fire, another "yellow vest" told the WSWS: "It's really extremely shocking. It had not happened in France since 1947 that the army was called in against protests. There, it is getting into a quagmire. ... They are there just to protect buildings, but they do not realize this has a terrible impact. It's really an admission of impotence to call in the army against the population while continuing to claim one is a patriot supporting law and order. This is clearly a new attack on democratic rights. The army is supposed to be there to shoot at enemies, not at the people."

Asked about events in Algeria, this "yellow vest" applauded the demonstration: "It is extremely beautiful what they are doing. They have succeeded much more than we have from early on, to expand the movement while remaining totally peaceful. And I think that for the time being they have better chances than us. Bouteflika has already given in once, I think that the masses are still mobilized and that they will succeed in forcing the government to turn around."

David, an IT professional, stressed his hostility to Macron's anti-democratic measures: "I am here first of all because everything that is happening with France today is attacking liberty with anti-violent protester

laws, given what is happening with the soldiers. They are trying to frighten us and today the people are hungry. There are people who cannot make it to the end of the month, who are having real trouble. ... Today the only response we have had from Mr. Macron is repression, it is to send more and more police against us. Now he is sending military men against us, he is issuing threats via the media and television."

There was similar opposition from a "yellow vest" and student, who cited police brutality to explain why he had decided to come to the Paris protest: "We are rather often told that this movement is running out of steam. But it is not the army's role to preserve law and order and to fire on the people. We have already had enough of riot police who hit people, who live difficult lives. I think the issue of people firing live ammunition now, it's just talk to frighten us. ... But then why send in the army? This movement has really scared those at the top. It's just to scare people, try to shift public opinion, but now public opinion is really behind us."

Asked about workers' struggles in Algeria and beyond, he compared that struggle with that of the "yellow vest" movement: "I have full solidarity with them on everything. ... We know very well whatever happens in other countries."



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