

France's "yellow vest" protests and the global resurgence of the class struggle

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On Saturday, May 4, the International Committee of the Fourth International held the 2019 International May Day Online Rally, the sixth annual online May Day Rally held by the ICFI, the world Trotskyist movement. The rally heard speeches on different aspects of the world crisis of capitalism, and the struggles of the international working class, from 12 leading members of the world party, and its sections and sympathizing organizations around the world.

On successive days, the World Socialist Web Site is publishing the texts of the speeches delivered at the rally. Below is the speech delivered by Alex Lantier, national secretary of the Parti d'égalité socialiste (Socialist Equality Party) in France. On Monday, the WSWs published the opening report to the rally, given by David North, the chairman of the international editorial board of the WSWs and national chairman of the Socialist Equality Party (US).

I am pleased to bring the fraternal greetings of the Socialist Equality Party of France to this International May Day rally. We are celebrating, for this day of the international working class, the global resurgence of the class struggle now shaking all of Europe.

In France, the "yellow vests" have protested for nearly six months now against the austerity, militarism and police repression of Emmanuel Macron.

This movement of hundreds of thousands of workers, as well as self-employed and small business people, first emerged on social media. It developed entirely outside all of the traditional institutions of official politics. The trade unions and established parties who, for decades, have claimed to represent the left—like the French Communist Party or the New Anticapitalist Party—reacted with open hostility to the launching of the movement, which they initially branded as neo-

fascist rioting.

The "yellow vests" demand the resignation of an illegitimate president of the Republic, who is only "the president of the rich." Supported by the vast majority of workers, they are confronting the French police state, which has arrested over 6,000 "yellow vests" and wounded thousands more—including dozens who have lost eyes to bean-bag bullets, or had hands torn off by police grenades.

And, since millions of Algerian workers and youth began to protest, demanding the fall of the military dictatorship, tens of thousands of Algerians in France have been protesting in solidarity, following the resignation of Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika.

Class struggle is rising across Europe, with Berlin's mass transit strike in Germany, the one-day Belgian national strike, and the Albanian student strikes to demand lower tuition fees. To the east, Polish unions are now trying to strangle the first national teachers strike since the Stalinist restoration of capitalism in Poland in 1989—a strike that has deeply shocked Poland's far-right government.

To the south, in Portugal, nurses are organizing strikes on social media, independently of unions tied to the social-democratic government, as are dockers, truck drivers, refinery workers and teachers.

These struggles vindicate the Trotskyist perspective of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). Rejection of the diktat of the banks, demands for profound economic change, and moods favorable to irreconcilable struggle dominate in the working class. The Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union and restoration of capitalism in 1991 did not mark the "End of History" and the ultimate triumph of capitalist democracy. The era in which these events could suppress the class struggle is over.

After three decades of imperialist wars and a decade of deep economic crisis since the 2008 crash, the spectre of the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism, through the conscious political action of the working class, once again haunts the ruling class.

Le Monde diplomatique magazine described the financial aristocracy's reaction as "Fear. Not of losing an election, failing to pass a given social cut, or of stock market losses. But of insurrection, revolt and destitution. For a half century, the French elite has not felt such fear." Businessmen fear "ending up with their heads on pikes," writes the financial magazine *L'Opinion*, and speak among themselves of the 1936 and 1968 French general strikes.

After six months of "yellow vest" protests, it is clear there will be no reformist outcome of the class struggle. Neither Macron, who has declared his admiration for the fascist dictator Philippe Pétain, nor the torturers of the Algerian military dictatorship, who killed hundreds of thousands during the Algerian civil war of the 1990s, will give anything to the workers.

The alternatives for workers are not reform or revolution, but revolution or counter-revolution. After the mass strikes erupted in Algeria, Macron called for sending in the army to help police the "yellow vest" protests, with authorization to shoot. This was the first time the French army had been deployed against social protests since the "insurrectionary strikes" of 1947–1948, when the capitalist class drowned the last great workers' struggles against fascist rule in blood and mass sackings.

One can identify certain calculations being made by Macron's government. Workers witnessed the example of the revolutionary uprising of Egyptian workers in 2011: three years of heroic struggle led to a bloody US-backed coup by General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, in 2013. Similarly, the Algerian regime is biding its time and preparing repression, coordinated this time with Paris.

But to crush the Algerian workers, Paris first wants to make sure that such repression will not provoke an uncontrolled social explosion at home. Already 20,000 Algerians have been marching in France, and Macron hopes to utilise the army to frighten the "yellow vests" into submission.

This International May Day, organized by the ICFI, is the most politically conscious response of the world working class.

The way forward is to mobilize the broad mass of the working class in an international struggle for state power, and to build socialism.

To mobilize workers in struggle, the ICFI must be built as the revolutionary leadership of the proletariat. The Egyptian revolution was an unforgettable lesson—paid with the blood of thousands—that militant protests are not enough to overcome entrenched ruling elites. Workers need their own independent action committees and, above all, the political perspective of the Trotskyist vanguard.

Workers in struggle, including many "yellow vests," feel ever more sharply the need for organization, but they cannot organize through the old bureaucracies. The resurgence of the class struggle has not arisen from the manoeuvres of the trade unions, or of parties linked to Stalinism or social democracy.

The "yellow vest" movement, for its part, as the SEP has reported, has denounced the unions and allied political parties as opportunists, cowards and, above all, as privileged elements, paid off by business to strangle their struggles and prevent the revolution they want to see happen.

The movements developing in Europe are the initial stage of a vast radicalisation that is emerging in the international working class. These strikes and protests signal far greater struggles that will erupt around the world. The only movement that can provide them with a revolutionary perspective is the ICFI. That perspective, which is being introduced to workers who are now becoming politically radicalized across the European continent, is the struggle to build the United Socialist States of Europe.



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