

“Yellow vest” protesters speak on the European elections

Our reporters
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Tens of thousands of people joined “yellow vest” protests across France on Saturday, the 29th successive week of protests and the first since the European elections held on May 26. The government reported an understated official count of 9,500 people, less than half the number reported by the “Yellow Number” Facebook page.

Campaigners for the Parti de l'égalité socialiste (Socialist Equality Party, PES) distributed leaflets of the *World Socialist Web Site* comment on the European elections, “The European elections and the resurgence of the class struggle,” and discussed the necessity for a socialist political perspective for the working class in the aftermath of the vote.

As in 2014, Marine Le Pen’s far-right National Rally was able to secure a narrow victory in Sunday’s elections by exploiting widespread social anger, hostility to the Macron government, and the rotten policies of the official “left” of the Socialist Party and Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s Unsubmissive France.

Those who spoke with PES campaigners expressed their hostility to the political establishment. Jennifer, 31, was attending her first “yellow vest” protest. She works as an employment recruiter in a private company. She did not vote in the elections because she said she could not support any of the candidates, after having been one of the more than 7 million people who voted for Mélenchon in the 2017 presidential election. More than 60 percent of Mélenchon’s voters switched to other parties in this vote.

“I came today to support the people fighting against this government that I am against and because I want a real democracy,” she said. “My friends have been here from the beginning, but this is the first for me. We do not really decide anything today. There are 9 million French who live under the poverty line. That’s not

acceptable, and in these conditions to make [Macron’s] concessions to the rich, like ending the fortune tax ...

“People voted not for Macron in the elections—but against Le Pen. Personally, I voted blank. But many of my friends voted for Macron to not have Le Pen. But it is not because we support him. There was a petition demanding climate justice that got over a million signatures, and still nothing is done. The media are owned by the rich. We are exactly the same as in Russia, that the media here pretend is so much less democratic. They take us for idiots and we’ve had enough of it.”

“In 2017, I voted Mélenchon,” Jennifer said. “But no more, because I don’t think of him anymore. We were not wanting just one more politician who does not really know the true problems of the population. He just wanted our votes. It is like this other deputy, who was told by a ‘yellow vest’ that he earned €1,500 per month, and replied, ‘Oh, are you part time?’”

Jean Petit is a 60-year-old logistics worker who loads pallets in the warehouse of a radio parts manufacturer located 20 minutes south of Paris, where he lives. “When this movement began it enabled people to find and meet each other for the first time who had had their own troubles and struggle but thought they were on their own,” he told WSWs reporters. “We had the chance to realize that we weren’t alone.”

“Macron’s responses have been crumbs, a little bit more for the minimum wage or pension, that are nothing to satisfy the population. What’s been revealed is this giant social gulf that is just getting bigger and bigger from year to year. The workers and the middle class are struggling in poverty day by day. The majority are falling into precarity. Now there’s a growing awareness that says, we must stop now this politics that is creating these two categories in France—the haves and

have-nots.

“I’ve lived in my town for 50 years. Twenty years ago there were two homeless people there. Now it is full of people in their mid-20s, physically fit to work and to live a normal life. But today if you depart from the typical profile, if you don’t have work papers, a residence, diploma—it’s enough to find yourself on the street. There are veterans from the war in Afghanistan who are homeless.

“Recently, my boss said to me, ‘I cannot afford to pay people the amount you are getting.’ He has hired young men 30 years old next to me doing the same thing as me for €200 per month less.

“Temporary work used to be for the employers to decide if you were a good worker; now it is permanent. If you try to get a loan for a house today and don’t have an indefinite-duration contract, the bank will say no immediately. There is such a need for work among the youth, and companies take advantage of it. They hire people for a month, two months at a time. The young workers at my job, you notice they are afraid to talk on the job. Wouldn’t you be if at the end of the month the employer could decide whether to bring you back the next week?”

Jean was scathing about the trade unions, whom he considers responsible for enforcing the attacks of the corporations and government, suppressing a united struggle of the workers. “The unions are dead—actually they are on the pay of the companies and the government. So why would they move against the people who pay them? Members do not even pay them now.”

Jean said he was attracted by the leaflet being distributed by Parti de l’égalité socialiste campaigners because it was international, published by a worldwide publication. “This is a type of struggle that is international,” he said, “and we have already seen the ‘yellow vests’ in Iraq. I came here precisely to speak to people who had more to say about broader issues. I am curious about this site because what is written there is more than just reflections on whether or not the people in my local area are going to come out and protest. You speak about issues of the 20th century.”

Jef, an aeronautics worker, also spoke of his disillusionment with the political establishment and official intellectual and cultural life today. He noted that Macron’s Republic on the March (LRM) party “is

taking over all the free-market liberals, the Socialist Party (PS), the free-market wing of The Republicans (LR). ... So a big right-wing PS-LR-LRM coalition is emerging.” He added that voting for the conservative or social democratic parties “is the same.”

He added that he did not believe media claims that the “yellow vest” protests are increasingly unpopular: “I think there is a lot of manipulation involved, but support for the essential demands of the movement has always been very strong, as you say, against inequality. You will see that this is still popular.”

He pointed to problems bound up with a broader political and intellectual climate: “People don’t know, they have been sort of brainwashed with capitalism, capitalism, all-out privatization. They are seeing that just privatizing everything goes nowhere. Wages are falling. So I think there is a need to develop consciousness, to educate people.”

Jef also pointed to the fact that the enormous international impact of the existence of the Soviet Union is constantly downplayed: “In World War II, who suffered the most losses? Everybody would say the Americans, but it was the Russians. Before 1968, you asked the same question and everyone said the Russians. Now they would say it was the Americans. This is how the mindset has been changed over time, but there are also people who can recount the history. There are older people who can tell the history, things can be confirmed. Veterans of 1968 and the Resistance are still with us.”



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