

French state demands four months' jail for "yellow vest" protester Eric Drouet

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On Friday, on the eve of the 30th weekend of "yellow vest" protests, French prosecutors demanded a four-month prison sentence against Eric Drouet, one of the leaders of the "yellow vest" movement. He was accused of "grouping with a view to preparing violence or degradation" and "carrying a prohibited category D weapon" during a demonstration. Drouet's conduct had been entirely peaceful, and the charges are fabricated out of whole cloth.

At the end of December, police arrested Drouet, who had organised a rally at the Place de la Concorde to pay tribute to the victims of police violence among "yellow vest" protesters. The reason for this arrest, representing an open repudiation of the right to demonstrate, was that the rally had not previously been declared to the prefecture. Drouet was also accused of having a piece of wood in order to "commit damage."

Drouet had already been sentenced on March 29 to a fine of €2,000, including a suspended fine of €500 for "organising" a demonstration "without prior declaration."

Drouet, who appealed the first decision, was appearing this time for possessing, according to his lawyer, "a piece of wood," when he was apprehended by police. His lawyer pointed to the peaceful nature of the December 22 demonstration. The prosecutor has requested a four-month suspended prison sentence. A court decision will be issued on September 4.

The accusations against Drouet are unfounded and point to the fact that a police state is being developed in France. The December 22 protest was not a mass demonstration, which is usually the subject of a declaration to the police prefecture, but a small gathering that the state wanted to ban. With this court decision, the ruling class sends a signal: any act of real political opposition, even if protected by law, will be criminalised and persecuted by the courts.

Lawyer Kheops Lara warned the judges, "What you are

going to judge is the 'yellow vest' movement," adding that the judges must "keep in mind" that his client is being prosecuted "because he is an important figure" in the rallies. "I am not defending a terrorist, I am defending someone who for 32 consecutive weekends has been calling for more democracy and social justice," said Lara, denouncing "a politicised legal case aimed at repressing this movement."

The accusation against Drouet that he had "a wooden truncheon to commit damage" was dismantled by the videos taken that day. The state did not even attempt to claim that Drouet had engaged in violent behaviour. But gripped with hysteria in the face of class anger rising among "yellow vests" and throughout the French working class, the government treats Drouet as though he arrived in Paris at the head of a private militia aimed at launching an insurrection in Paris and seizing the Elysée.

Even the description of his arrest made by *Le Monde*, which has reportedly favoured on the prosecution's arguments in the trial, shows that his conduct was legal and peaceful: "A group of demonstrators wait peacefully to get off the street while the police surround them on all sides. 'The CRS want Eric, but we are keeping him,' says a demonstrator who films the scene. Leaning against a wall, Eric Drouet chats with a few of his friends, while typing on his phone. As a member of the group insulted the police, the police charged the demonstrators and arrested Eric Drouet in a split second, in front of a stunned crowd."

After his arrest, Drouet was taken to a police van and hidden from view. There, the police discovered a piece of wood in his bag that he used as a truck driver to protect himself from possible attacks. But as is made clear by the media reports, Drouet had no intention of committing violence. He did not respond to the police attempt to arrest him.

Drouet's trial is aimed at setting an example to terrorise

all protesters, while trampling on basic constitutional rights. It is utilising the police-state measures developed under the former Socialist Party government of François Hollande.

The gulf between Drouet's peaceful actions and the violent police assault is the product of the extraordinary level of social inequality in France and across Europe. The financial aristocracy is confronting a resurgence of class struggle in Europe and internationally. Feeling itself besieged on all sides, the ruling class is terrified of the growing opposition of workers and the far more powerful eruption of working-class struggle that the "yellow vest" protests portend.

The Drouet trial is part of a violent crackdown on "yellow vests" that has seen the largest wave of arrests in France since the Nazi Occupation. More than 7,000 "yellow vests" were arrested, about 2,000 injured by police, and dozens of demonstrators lost either eyes or hands to LBDs (*lanceurs de balles de defense*—pellet guns) and teargas grenades.

Now, the police are taking comments posted on Facebook or social networks to declare a small meeting illegal. Any demonstration can be declared illegal by an arbitrary decision of the police, leading to legal charges against anyone who opposes the government's policy.

Drouet was not arrested for violence, and he had not taken the piece of wood out of his bag when the police arrested him. The police were clearly ordered to arrest Drouet and search him to find a pretext for his conviction.

The government targeted Drouet because he became a spokesperson for fractions of the "yellow vests" opposed to Macron's proposals for worthless negotiations. In early September, the government searched Drouet's home and interviewed his wife in an attempt to intimidate him, after he had publicly called for a protest march directly into the Élysée Palace. Since then, the state and the judiciary have been conducting a campaign of constant pressure and intimidation against him.



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