

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

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Seven months ago, hundreds of thousands of "yellow vest" protesters came together on social media to oppose the anti-worker policies of France's "president of the rich," Emmanuel Macron. Donning yellow high-visibility vests to protest Macron's regressive fuel taxes, they denounced low wages, austerity and police-state militarism. The demonstrations, which won sympathy from the vast majority of workers and exposed Macron as an isolated and reviled figure, became the most significant political opposition movement in France since the May 1968 general strike.

These protests are a turning point in France and internationally, marking the initial re-entry of the working class onto the political stage.

Anger at staggering levels of social inequality, ever-deeper poverty and misery, the enrichment of a tiny elite and state repression, is beginning to erupt among workers worldwide. Alongside the "yellow vests," the greatest upsurge of the world proletariat in decades is unfolding. Mass US teachers strikes, wildcat strikes of Mexican *maquiladora* workers, and strikes against European Union (EU) wage freezes across Europe, have erupted alongside strikes by plantation workers and civil servants in the Indian subcontinent and mass protests for the overthrow of military regimes in Sudan and Algeria. These struggles have all advanced a militant rejection of the diktat of the banks, and demands for profound social change.

After seven months of "yellow vest" protests, it is critical to draw the lessons of the struggle so far, based on a frank and unsparing assessment of the situation facing working people.

Amid growing US threats of war with Iran and trade war with China, the financial aristocracy has refused to make any concessions whatsoever to these struggles, in France and internationally. Since the "yellow vest" protests began, Macron has announced fundamental attacks on what remains of the social rights established after the Soviet defeat of Nazism in World War II—replacing state pensions with a "pension by points," of indeterminate monetary value, eliminating lifetime employment in the public sector, and slashing health and education funding. It is ever more evident that workers cannot effect change through negotiations with political representatives of the capitalist class.

The "yellow vests" have faced an unprecedented onslaught from the police state. Tens of thousands of police with armored cars, water cannon, stun grenades, bean bag bullets and automatic rifles have wounded over 2,000 people, dozens of whom have lost hands to police grenades or eyes to bean bag bullets. More than 7,000 – 9,000 on December 8 alone were detained in the greatest mass arrests in metropolitan France since the Nazi Occupation. This culminated in March, with Macron authorizing the army to fire on social protests for the first time in France since the 1947 insurrectionary strikes, the last workers' uprising in France, directly after World War II and the fall of fascism.

The decisive question is: what revolutionary perspectives are necessary for the emerging movement of the international working class? The "yellow vest" movement has vindicated the perspectives of the

International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and its French section, the *Parti de l'égalité socialiste* (PES). The restoration of capitalism in Eastern Europe and China in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 by the Stalinist regimes did not mark the "End of History" and the final triumph of a democratic capitalist order. The period when the impact of these events sufficed to suppress the class struggle is over. After 30 years of escalating imperialist war and a decade of economic crisis since the 2008 Wall Street crash, the specter of conscious revolutionary action by the working class is once again haunting the financial aristocracy.

The "yellow vest" movement also vindicated the ICFI's analysis of the form the resurgence of class struggle would take. It is an international rebellion against the unions, social-democratic and Stalinist parties and their allies among the Pabloite descendants of petty-bourgeois renegades from Trotskyism. Even in France, a center of these political tendencies, militant protest has emerged not from one of their maneuvers, or from one of their dissident factions, but totally outside their control.

This initial upsurge of class struggle has revealed the gulf separating workers from affluent layers of the middle class rooted in the post-1968 student movement, that have long dominated what passes for "left" politics. For weeks, the union bureaucrats, state-funded academics and media pundits of the middle class pseudo-left boycotted the protests, seeking refuge in tiny feminist #MeToo rallies or at home. Their focus on sexuality, race and lifestyle played no role in the protests against social inequality that erupted among the bottom 90 percent of the income ladder.

Terrified of a revolutionary upsurge from below, they opposed the "yellow vests." Unions shut down truckers and port strikes, called in solidarity with the "yellow vests" in the initial weeks of the protests. Echoing the French Stalinists' foul slanders of the Trotskyist movement in the 20th century as "Hitler-Trotskyists," Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT) boss Philippe Martinez repeatedly slandered them as fascists, hinting that "brown" was hidden under their yellow vests. Many parties, like the Pabloite New Anticapitalist Party (NPA), echoed his remarks. Even those who were less openly hostile, like Jean-Luc Mélenchon's Unsubmissive France (LFI), did not play a notably different role: despite obtaining 7 million votes in the 2017 presidential election, LFI organized not one protest to support the "yellow vests."

The "yellow vests" have demonstrated one essential point: to mount a powerful struggle, workers and youth must mobilize independently of the unions and petty bourgeois pseudo-left parties. The outbreak of the first independent struggles has only raised more sharply, however, political issues posed to workers worldwide in this new revolutionary era. Leon Trotsky explained, in his great *History of the Russian Revolution*:

The masses go into a revolution not with a prepared plan of social reconstruction, but with a sharp feeling that they cannot endure the old régime. Only the guiding layers of a class have a

political program, and even this still requires the test of events, and the approval of the masses. The fundamental political process of the revolution thus consists in the gradual comprehension by a class of the problems arising from the social crisis—the active orientation of the masses by a method of successive approximations.

The “yellow vest” protests erupted in the initial stages of this process. Hundreds of thousands of workers and impoverished middle class people concluded that it was pointless to appeal to the established parties or to the unions, who would only sell out and shut down any struggle. Having previously voted for parties of every coloration, they united behind calls for revolution against Macron. But in this first approximation, questions of perspective and program remain unresolved. There was no agreement on what would replace Macron. Some “yellow vests” refused any discussion of politics as divisive, or dismissed socialism as the policy of the discredited petty-bourgeois periphery of France’s big-business Socialist Party (PS). Facing relentless calls in the media to formulate demands that Macron might grant, they advanced slogans like the Swiss-style Citizen-Initiated Referendum (RIC) initially proposed by Mélenchon, calling for the transfer of power to the people.

Efforts to reform French parliamentary democracy, however, have failed. The National Assembly refuses to adopt the RIC, and militant protest has only convinced the state to step up its repression. Many “yellow vests” sense that the way forward is to mobilize the mass support they have among workers. But, however much sympathy workers feel for the “yellow vests,” they do not see slogans like the RIC as a basis for what would be a revolutionary confrontation with the Macron regime, the EU and the world’s financial markets.

The turn must be to the perspectives advanced in France by the PES. It has uncompromisingly defended the “yellow vests,” opposing their repression by the state and their vilification by the media and the major parties, including the pseudo-left. It has insisted on the need for workers to build independent committees of action, in France and internationally, on the Trotskyist perspective of the struggle for political power, and to build the ICFI as the revolutionary vanguard of the working class. Events daily confirm that the alternatives facing the working class are not reform or revolution, but revolution or counter-revolution. The only way to stop attacks on workers living standards is to mobilize the full industrial and economic power of the international working class to take control of the economy, expropriate the financial aristocracy and take state power.

The financial aristocracy’s drive to dictatorship

Policies of austerity and military-police repression are rooted in an objective, historic crisis of world capitalism. The period since the dissolution of the Soviet Union has not only seen the obscene enrichment of a tiny financial aristocracy in every country. Economic globalization has vastly exacerbated the contradictions of capitalism—between world economy and the nation-state system, and between socialized production and the private accumulation of profit—that led, in the 20th century, to world war and fascist dictatorship, but also to social revolution.

Freed from the political-military obstacle posed by the Soviet Union, the NATO powers invaded Iraq, the Balkans, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Mali and beyond, plundering the strategic, oil-rich areas of Asia and Africa. This imperialist war drive, which has claimed millions of lives, has gone hand in hand with attacks on wages and social conditions that have intensified social inequality, economic instability, and financial crises.

The 2008 Wall Street crash, caused by the banks’ criminal speculation, nearly brought down the entire world financial system.

The EU powers reacted by pumping trillions of euros into the pockets of the super-rich, funded by austerity and targeting what remained of the social concessions made to European workers after the Soviet defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II. They rammed through broad attacks on universal health care, free public education and protections from arbitrary sackings. This was epitomized by the EU’s decade-long looting of Greece, which sank that country into Europe’s deepest recession since capitalist restoration in the Soviet Union itself. Amid a vast growth of social misery, the wealth of France’s billionaires has more than tripled since 2008, while Macron plunges hundreds of billions of euros into building up the French and EU war machine, and gradually restores universal military service to prepare for even greater wars.

The strategists of the ruling class know that continuing to impose such policies, in the face of growing anger and militancy in the working class, requires a turn to authoritarian-fascistic rule. In a 2013 note written during the euro crisis, the JP Morgan bank discussed the obstacles the banks hoped to destroy in order to restructure Europe’s southern “periphery.” It wrote:

Constitutions tend to show a strong socialist influence, reflecting the political strength that left-wing parties gained after the defeat of fascism. ... Political systems around the periphery typically display several of the following features: weak central states relative to regions; constitutional protections of labor rights; consensus-building systems that foster political clientelism; and the right to protest if unwelcome changes are made to the political status quo. The shortcomings of this political legacy have been revealed by the crisis.

For the European bourgeoisie, the current crisis marks the end of the democratic concessions made to the working class after World War II. At that time, European capitalism was discredited by the deaths of tens of millions in the war, fascist repression and the Holocaust. To justify preserving capitalism in France, the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF), the social-democrats, and bourgeois followers of General Charles de Gaulle, united in the National Resistance Council (CNR), promised to carry out the “eviction of the great economic and financial aristocracies from their commanding role in the economy.” They nationalized several industries, created Social Security health and pension systems, and wrote the right to strike and protest into France’s constitution, as a pledge that the outlawing of class struggle under the Nazis would never return. Similar provisions were adopted in Italy, and then across much of capitalist Europe.

Seventy-five years later, what remains of this political system is collapsing. Europe’s social-democratic parties, like France’s big-business Socialist Party (PS), which came to dominate what passed for the French “left” after the 1968 general strike, are disintegrating amid mounting class anger at decades of austerity and war. A new stage in the class struggle has emerged. Tearing up rights it promised to forever uphold, the bourgeoisie is re-building fascistic regimes.

The fact that this policy is pursued across Europe underscores that it is rooted, not in the personal obstinacy of individual politicians like Macron, but in objective class interests. In Germany, all the major bourgeois parties cover for far-right extremist professors like Jörg Baberowski, as they whitewash Hitler’s crimes in order to legitimize unpopular policies of austerity and the re-militarizing of German foreign policy. At the same time, the neo-fascist Alternative for Germany (AfD) is being systematically built up in the German parliament. In Spain, after Madrid’s

crackdown on the 2017 Catalan independence referendum, the army and police have promoted the Vox party, which hails the fascist army that launched a coup and the 1936-1939 Spanish Civil War. Vox also calls for banning Marxist parties. Italy's far-right strongman, Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, applauds the fascist dictator Benito Mussolini. And, as he launched the crackdown on the "yellow vest" protests, Macron hailed the dictator of France's Nazi-collaborationist Vichy regime—the convicted traitor and mass murderer Philippe Pétain—as a great soldier.

The conclusions that flow from such tectonic shifts in European and world politics can only be drawn in historical perspective. It is not, as much of the French media claims, that the left and socialism are dead. Rather, the CNR's promises to curb the power of "economic and financial aristocracies" in a national framework under capitalism has proven to be false, and the CNR's Stalinist, social democratic and Gaullist tendencies—which provided the framework for official French politics for decades—are all bankrupt. Today, a global financial aristocracy has re-emerged. It is not only devouring all the social wealth created by the working class to feed its obscene fortunes, it is also rehabilitating 20th century fascist criminals, in order to build authoritarian regimes in the 21st.

The colossal figure that emerges as the historic alternative to this disintegration of official European politics is Leon Trotsky. The co-leader of the October Revolution with Lenin and founder of the Fourth International against the nationalist degeneration of the Soviet bureaucracy under Stalin, not only correctly warned of Stalinism's counterrevolutionary role inside the Soviet Union. His defense of the program of world socialist revolution against Stalinism founded a movement that, long after Trotsky's murder by a Stalinist assassin on August 21, 1940, still provides a Marxist internationalist perspective for the working class.

After World War II, the Trotskyist movement alone opposed the Stalinist parties, including the PCF, then the dominant party in the French working class, as they blocked socialist revolution in Europe. Before the war, Stalin had ordered Trotsky's assassination, the murder of surviving Old Bolsheviks in the Moscow Trial frame-ups, and the political genocide of Marxists in the USSR in the Great Purges. As the war ended, Stalin agreed with the heads of Europe's Stalinist parties, including the PCF, that the working class would not take power. The Trotskyists opposed the Stalinist disbanding of independent organizations of working class struggle that had sprung up across France and Europe amid uprisings against fascism—including Resistance militias and factory committees, which the Stalinist parties disarmed and dissolved. The Fourth International also opposed the vote for France's 1946 constitution based on the CNR's program, correctly warning that a capitalist republic would inevitably betray the hopes workers were encouraged to place in it.

This historical assessment—borne out by bloody French colonial wars in Indochina and Algeria, and then the PCF's sell-out of the May 1968 general strike, during which it refused to take power—is vindicated today by the bourgeoisie's turn to authoritarian forms of rule across Europe.

The "yellow vest" movement has also underscored the historic significance of the ICFI's struggle against the petty-bourgeois Pabloite renegades from Trotskyism. The Pabloite NPA is led by former 1968 student protesters, who rallied to the petty-bourgeois tendency led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel that had split with the ICFI in 1953—calling for the Fourth International to liquidate itself into mass Stalinist and bourgeois nationalist parties of that era, claiming these could replace the Fourth International as the revolutionary leadership of the working class. The Pabloites thus adapted to the post-war capitalist set-up in Western Europe that the Stalinists had helped create. In his book *Trotskyisms*, the late NPA and 1968 student leader Daniel Bensaïd explained the Pabloites' split with the ICFI thus: "At the end of the 1940s, the conditions in which the Fourth International had been created

had considerably changed. Its program had to be redefined. Pablo dared to carry out this updating. ... Pablo understood how, already in the 1950s, one could audaciously raise the issues of women's liberation, self-management and democratic socialism." That is, Pablo proposed to liquidate the ICFI's Trotskyist program and replace it with conceptions popular among the affluent social layers who became integrated into Western Europe's post-war capitalist regime.

The "yellow vests" emerged in a rebellion against this type of lifestyle and identity politics, which has passed for the "left" for a half century since 1968. Its pretensions to be a more democratic, modern alternative to the Trotskyism and classical Marxism defended by the PES were a fraud. Instead, the parties that base themselves upon these politics accommodate themselves to capitalism, even as it turns back to fascistic rule and the drive to global war.

The "yellow vests" and the bankruptcy of the pseudo-left

The record of the "yellow vest" protests has confirmed the ICFI's analysis that the NPA and similar parties internationally are neither left-wing nor "far left," but pseudo-left, anti-Marxist parties based in the affluent petty bourgeoisie, separated by a class gulf from the workers. Amid a turn to dictatorship across Europe, they have reacted to the greatest upsurge of class struggle in France in a half century with disgust and alarm. In the initial weeks of the protests, the Stalinists and Pabloites did not bother to hide their hostility to the "yellow vests," denouncing them as fascist agents of big business. While the Stalinist CGT called them a "manipulation of the anger of citizens and workers by the far right and road transport interests," the NPA ferociously attacked them. It wrote:

Just like the CGT and Solidarity unions, we will not mix our anger on Saturday November 17 with bosses' maneuvers exploited by the far right, which is not a temporary ally but remains a mortal enemy. Yes, everything is going up except wages, and the lower classes are right to be sick and tired of price rises for fuel and in general ... But we cannot say this on Saturday November 17, in the actions or supposed citizens' gatherings that look like far right mobs, in which we would line up with the deadliest enemies of the workers' movement.

The statements of the NPA, and supposedly "left" trade unions, deserve to be committed to memory. They illustrate very clearly the class psychology of the privileged social forces making up the pseudo-left, focused on postmodernist politics of gender, lifestyle and ethnic identity. Faced with demands for greater social equality for the "lower classes," they denounce the "lower classes," that is to say, the workers, as fascists, in the name of the "workers' movement," that is to say, France's state-subsidized union bureaucracy and the affluent middle class.

The NPA's statement was a baseless slander. The "yellow vests" are socially and politically heterogeneous, including layers of impoverished middle class and self-employed people, living on tiny incomes or pensions, as well as workers. They include voters for all France's major electoral parties, including the neo-fascists. "Yellow vest" workers recognize the legitimate demands of the middle class protesters marching alongside them, and have rejected Macron's attempts to end the protest by offering workers a few sops, like marginal minimum wage increases.

The significant neo-fascist vote in France undoubtedly points to serious dangers. In the recent European elections, 23 percent of French voters

chose the neo-fascist list, primarily as a protest vote against Macron, under conditions where all the nominally “left” parties were correctly seen as tools of the ruling class. This reflects powerful nationalist pressures and political confusion in France, including in the working class, after decades of placing its confidence in parties—the PCF and later the PS—that imposed austerity, waged imperialist wars, and promoted anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim policies once they took office.

Preparations for the installation of a fascist regime in France are well advanced. However, the official rehabilitation of fascists across Europe, including Macron’s invocation of Pétain as he wages a bloody crackdown on the “yellow vests,” underscores that the legitimization of neo-fascism is overwhelmingly driven from the top. Fascistic violence during the protests came not from the “yellow vests,” but from layers of the security forces and the police trade unions, where the neo-fascists have an electoral base. For now, as the “yellow vest” protests have made clear, the mass support in the middle class for fascism, which emerged in the 1930s in Europe, does not exist. At this stage in the class struggle, the impoverished middle class has sought an alliance with the workers.

The critical task is for the working class to demonstrate its ability to lead a struggle against capitalism, rallying behind it all the oppressed layers of the population. The resurgence of workers struggles across Europe and internationally points to the growing readiness of the working class for such a strategy. But the fight to mobilize broader layers of workers in struggle requires a conscious political break with the pseudo left. This fight can only be waged against the populist parties that oppose socialist revolution, deny class struggle, and try to cut workers in France off from their class brothers and sisters internationally, so as to subordinate them to nationalism and capitalism.

This was the role played by the so-called “left populists” in Mélenchon’s Unsubmissive France (LFI) party. While it speaks only for a different faction of the trade union and academic pseudo-left than the NPA, Mélenchon did not to attack the “yellow vests” quite as clumsily as the Pabloites did. Having obtained 20 percent of the vote in the 2017 presidential elections, LFI hoped to maintain its claim to be Macron’s “leading opponent.” And so, while it viewed the resurgence of the class struggle with alarm, no less than the NPA, LFI took a somewhat different tack. Mélenchon claimed on his blog that he was “jubilant” because the “yellow vest” protests had provided “confirmation of the theoretical model formulated in my theory of citizens revolution...”

Mélenchon tried to exploit the fact that the “yellow vests” said they were fighting for the “people,” that is, not only salaried workers but also toiling middle class people—small businessmen, farmers and the self-employed. The class content of Mélenchon’s call for a “citizens revolution” of the people was, however, entirely different. Promoting identity politics based on gender and ethnicity, and especially French nationalism, Mélenchon spoke for layers of the bourgeoisie and of the affluent middle class concentrated in the wealthiest 10 percent of the population.

Mélenchon entered into politics as a student, via Pierre Lambert’s *Organisation communiste internationaliste* (OCI), the ICFI’s former French section, shortly after it split with the ICFI in 1971, and oriented to building the “Union of the Left” with the PCF and the PS—a bourgeois party founded in 1971 as an electoral vehicle for the ex-Vichyite social-democrat, François Mitterrand. This nationalist, liquidationist perspective led the OCI to send its members to simultaneously work in the PS, which Mélenchon joined in 1976. One OCI member, Lionel Jospin, went on to become the prime minister of France’s PS-led, pro-austerity Plural Left government in 1997-2002. After popular disgust with the Plural Left government led to Jospin’s elimination in the 2002 presidential election, and a decade in which the PS was kept out of the presidency, Mélenchon left to found his own movement, the Left Front, in alliance with the PCF, in 2009. It became LFI in 2016.

Mélenchon’s call today for a national “citizens revolution” was elaborated in discussions with Chantal Mouffe, the postmodernist feminist and “left populist” mentor of LFI’s Greek ally, the pro-austerity Syriza (“Coalition of the Radical Left”) government of Alexis Tsipras. It is bitterly opposed to Marxism. Left populism, Mouffe writes, “does not require a ‘revolutionary’ break with the liberal democratic regime” and opposes those “who keep reducing politics to the contradiction of capital/labor and attribute an ontological privilege to the working class, presented as the vehicle for socialist revolution.” That is, in line with the broader milieu of 1968 ex-student radicals, Mouffe opposes the fundamental conceptions of Marxism.

And in his blog, Mélenchon hastened to add that his supposedly revolutionary theory could not serve as the basis of a struggle for power. “In all cases,” he wrote, “my work does not say how the regime could fall under the blows of such a movement. All the more so, because in my view the result must be peaceful and democratic. That is to say, in all cases we must find an institutional solution to events.” He also stressed his opposition to “traditional dogmas of the traditional left and far left,” like “the centrality of the concept of proletariat and socialist revolution as the inevitable pairing in the dynamic of History.” Thus Mélenchon, like Mouffe, bases himself on a conscious rejection of Marxism and the class struggle, orienting on a nationalist basis to the French state.

This scornful attack on the class struggle and socialism as “dogma,” illustrates the bankruptcy of the pseudo-left. “Yellow vest” demands had overwhelming popular support, Mélenchon obtained 7 million votes, and strikes were breaking out among teachers and nurses in France and broader layers of workers internationally. Nonetheless, neither LFI, nor the unions or any pseudo left party sought to develop a revolutionary struggle against Macron based on this growing opposition.

Even when the NPA reversed course and the pseudo-left parties sent more forces to the “yellow vest” protests this winter, they neither sought to build a movement nor succeeded in rallying support among the “yellow vests.” They simply tried to bring the protests under the control of the union bureaucracy, which the “yellow vest” protesters overwhelmingly rejected. The exposure of these parties as irrelevant and hostile to real struggle underlay the sudden and drastic collapse of LFI in the 2019 European elections, where it obtained less than a third of its 2017 vote. It is ever more evident that over an entire historical period, the anti-Marxist propaganda retailed by Mouffe, Mélenchon and other postmodernists, has succeeded only in blocking the construction of a Marxist revolutionary vanguard and handing the initiative to the ruling class.

Which way forward from the “yellow vest” movement?

For months, official media have predicted the imminent demoralization and collapse of the “yellow vests.” With tens of thousands still protesting in their yellow vests each Saturday, and growing layers of workers striking in France and internationally, the upsurge in the working class is, however, only just beginning. Under the surface of official political life, far larger and more explosive movements are brewing. The question is how to orient this emerging revolutionary movement of the working class, amid an advanced state of collapse of the old political establishment, and the acute danger of war and authoritarian rule.

The task is to build the PES in France and sections of the ICFI in countries around the world, to bring a revolutionary perspective and leadership into the working class. The “yellow vest” movement and the broader international resurgence of the class struggle, have powerfully vindicated the calls of the PES and the entire ICFI for workers to struggle independently of the trade unions and established parties, including the

supposedly “left” parties. This was not a sectarian or utopian policy, but the only realistic basis for prosecuting class struggle. The “yellow vests,” a relatively small layer of workers and middle class people, have dealt a devastating blow to Macron, precisely because they broke through what had been these organizations’ death grip on social struggle. They defied threats from riot police and the army brass, and dismissed attacks from official media, leading politicians, and union officials with the contempt they deserve. Amid a growing radicalization in the working class, they found mass support.

The critical obstacle facing the “yellow vest” movement has not been organizational difficulties in coordinating actions. Rather, it has been mobilizing the mass sympathy they have, and the myriad social media and neighborhood groups emerging around them, under conditions where the necessity of an international struggle for workers’ power is felt only in a diffuse, embryonic way—that is, when the revolutionary vanguard in the working class remains small. For it is impossible to find a revolutionary perspective without situating today’s struggles in the continuity of those of the entire workers’ movement, based on classical Marxism, the October revolution and Trotskyism. The task facing advanced workers and youth is to come to grips with the issues of political and historical perspective fought out by the ICFI.

In the initial stages of the resurgence of class struggle, popular opposition retains traces of the previous era, when what passed for the “left” was the politics of the affluent middle class, stated in popular-democratic terms and rejecting class struggle. The “yellow vest” movement began only two years after the founding of the PES—when, after the betrayals of the Pabloites, and the OCI’s 1971 break with the ICFI, there had been no Trotskyist party in France worthy of the name for nearly a half-century. Many political issues remain to be clarified.

Among the “yellow vests,” calls for “apolitical” protests rejecting all parties have enjoyed a wide hearing. This resonates with workers’ anger against the entire political establishment. Pseudo-left forces advance it, however, to block discussion and prevent a conscious break from parties that have imposed austerity. In this context, slogans like the RIC, in which workers see an expression of legitimate demands to control political and economic decisions, cannot serve as a basis for class struggle. Separated from a struggle for the international expropriation of the financial aristocracy, for workers control of global production processes, and for workers power, such slogans amount to calls for reforms from the French capitalist state, which will not be granted. On this basis, even sincere calls from the “yellow vests” for general strikes or revolution, like their attempts to establish independent popular assemblies, have not attracted masses of workers to a decisive struggle against Macron, the EU and the financial markets.

Even today, despite a profound capitalist crisis, the bourgeoisie acts with far greater consciousness of its class aims than the workers. On the one hand, via the official media, it promotes the gaseous calls of charlatans like Mélenchon for a revolution of the entire people, based on claims that the class struggle has been swept into the dustbin of history; on the other, the top personnel of the banks and the state machine know they are waging a class struggle and intend to wage it ruthlessly.

In a February article, titled “The class struggle in France,” *Le Monde diplomatique* described the panic that seized the ruling class when the “yellow vest” protests broke out: “Fear. Not of losing an election, failing to ‘reform,’ or taking stock market losses. But of insurrection, revolt and destitution. For a half-century, the French elites had not felt such fear.” It cited the head of a polling firm who said the mood among top CEOs “is like what I read about 1936 or 1968,” the years of the two greatest general strikes in French history. Comparing the unrestrained hatred and fear of the “yellow vests” in the stock exchanges and corporate boardrooms to the bourgeoisie’s murderous anger against the 1848 revolution and the 1871 Paris Commune, which it drowned in blood, the monthly added for

good measure: “Those who have been frightened never forgive those who have frightened them, or those who have witnessed their fear.”

The brutality of the bourgeoisie should not be underestimated. But it reflects the social gulf separating it from the overwhelming majority of the population that works for a living, which is, in the final analysis the weakness of the ruling class. The bloodcurdling threats, emanating from the state machine and the media, are the product of desperation, faced with a deepening political crisis from which they see no way out. The period where such conflicts were discussed primarily in national and populist, rather than class terms is coming to an end. More and more, workers will see and seek to wage these conflicts, as the bourgeoisie already does, along class lines. The objective situation is creating the conditions for rapid shifts in the political consciousness of the working class, in France and internationally, and for the building of powerful working class organizations.

The relentless deterioration of living conditions across Europe and beyond, and the ruling elite’s resort to military-police violence, are radicalizing hundreds of millions of workers. International demands for greater social equality, which triggered the “yellow vest” protests, are provoking rising support for socialism and communism, especially among youth. There is a broad sense that workers face the same problems in every country. Increasingly, workers will feel the need to build organizations that can turn general feelings of international solidarity into a united struggle of the international working class against authoritarianism, austerity and war.

The critical task facing the PES is to consolidate, prior to the outbreak of the decisive revolutionary confrontation, its presence among the most advanced workers and youth, based on an assimilation of the critical political lessons of the history of the international class struggle. It seeks to build a revolutionary vanguard, fighting to unite workers’ struggles in France with those of their class brothers and sisters internationally, and lead them in an offensive against capitalism, war and the danger of police-state rule. It advances demands for the expropriation of the financial aristocracy, the end of imperialist wars and occupations, and the defense of democratic rights.

The class struggle requires building European and international networks of popular workplace and neighborhood committees, independent of and opposed to corporate-funded union bureaucracies, in line with the transnational character of contemporary economy. The “yellow vests” have shown that hundreds of thousands of people can come together on social media in France, independently of the unions and established political parties, for class struggle. The expansion to a far broader and international movement in the working class must be prepared.

The PES calls upon all workers and youth who oppose capitalism and recognize the necessity for socialism to study the ICFI’s materials and join it or its youth organization, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality. Their task is to bring Marxist consciousness to the emerging movement of the working class, as to the nature of the political situation, the movement in the working class and its aims; to advocate and assist in building workplace committees and oppositional youth and student groups; and to fight to link the growth of class struggle to a socialist, internationalist and anti-imperialist movement in the European and international working class, to take state power and reorganize economic life on the basis of social need instead of private profit. Within Europe, this means the struggle to replace the European Union with the United Socialist States of Europe.



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