

Police assault “yellow vests” after Macron forced to flee crowd in Paris theater

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Saturday saw a violent police crackdown on weekly “yellow vest” marches in Paris, after French President Emmanuel Macron was booed and confronted by protesters Friday night on one of his rare public appearances, at the Bouffes du nord theater in the capital. Coming amid ongoing mass strikes against Macron’s pension cuts, the events underscored that France’s “president of the rich” is widely hated by workers and youth.

After news emerged on social media that Macron had been sighted at the theater, crowds gathered outside the Bouffes du nord chanting “Macron resign” and “All together, general strike.” Protesters also sought to enter the theater and confront Macron, who was watching a play together with his wife Brigitte and a large security detail.

The Élysée presidential palace initially sought to mislead the public and downplay the incident, claiming that the president ignored the protest and watched the play through to the end. However, it later confirmed press reports that the presidential couple had to be “placed in security” for several minutes when dozens of protesters managed to enter the theater via the stage. Large detachments of CRS riot police surrounded the theater and Macron fled the area under chants of “Macron resign” from the crowd.

Macron’s staff issued a statement to BFM-TV, declaring: “The President will continue going to the theater with his spouse as he is used to doing. He will continue to protect freedom of expression and creation by artists threatened by political violence.”

In fact, the incident showed that Macron is so deeply hated that he cannot show his face in public anywhere without provoking major protests. When “yellow vest” protests broke out in 2018, he was so terrified of popular anger at his arrogance and austerity agenda that

a helicopter was kept on 24-hour stand-by to evacuate him, in case he fell into the hands of the French people. Despite the government’s repeated claims the “yellow vest” crisis is “behind” it, it remains evident that Macron is now more deeply unpopular than before.

As for the Élysée’s claim that Macron works to protect “freedom of expression,” it is belied by the endless stream of attacks on basic democratic rights and acts of bloody police brutality that his government is unleashing on workers and youth protesting his policies.

News of Macron’s arrival at the theater had circulated on several social media accounts, including one of independent Franco-Algerian journalist Taha Bouhafs, who tweeted: “I’m now at the Bouffes du nord theater (metro La Chapelle), three rows behind the president of the Republic. Militants are in the area and calling everyone to come in support. Something is being prepared, the evening will probably be eventful.”

After Macron’s ignominious flight from the theater, police proceeded to arrest Bouhafs on charges of “participating in a grouping formed with a view to committing violence or damages” and organizing an undeclared protest. They kept Bouhafs under preventive arrest (*garde à vue*) for the evening.

Not only is the arrest of a journalist for reporting the president’s presence an extraordinary attack on democratic rights, but the charge confirms that just reporting Macron’s presence is enough to produce outrage and spontaneous protests in Paris.

The police-state machine responded the next day, organizing a massive police presence and brutally cracking down on the 62nd weekly protest of the “yellow vests” in Paris. From the beginning of the march, the several thousand “yellow vests” were entirely surrounded by large detachments of heavily-

armed riot police and dozens of police vans in front of and behind the marchers. Even in well-to-do areas of northwestern Paris, however, residents could be seen coming to the windows to applaud the protesters as they passed by.

Patrick, a retired nurse on the Paris “yellow vest” march, told the WSWWS he was protesting because “we have to struggle against this quote-unquote president, because I think he is really disintegrating. He will plunge France into bloodshed. The one piece of advice that I would give him is to leave immediately with his head high, because otherwise he will leave later with his tail between his legs.”

Patrick said he thought the unions had lost control of the class struggle, despite calling a transport strike last December after over a year of “yellow vest” protests. He said, “The workers broke out of the trade union straitjacket, and the unions are trying to take back control of the movement for now. But I think they have gotten around to it a bit too late.”

Thierry, a striking Paris transit worker, criticized police violence against the “yellow vests,” saying: “There are certain parallels between the police of the [Nazi-collaborationist] Vichy regime, the police of [1960s ex-Vichy collaborationist official Maurice] Papon and Macron’s police. This violence against the French people is unacceptable. The problem is that they have accepted the unacceptable. Now it is time to wake up and stop police from mutilating people just because they are protesting. We have a constitutional right to protest.”

Speaking on how to deal with this problem, Thierry stressed the importance of the international resurgence of the class struggles across the Middle East and Latin America, and beyond: “In fact, there is an international movement that is beginning, but it is not yet organized. We see things are moving all around the world, but what we don’t have is a world organization, and that we are missing. I did not know for instance about the class struggles you raised in the United States.”

Violent clashes broke out between riot police and the “yellow vest” protesters shortly before the march reached its destination, the Gare de Lyon train station. Police had suddenly halted the march, trapping protesters on Rue de Lyon and bringing up water cannon while refusing to allow protesters to leave. Clashes erupted, with police firing volleys of tear gas

and rubber bullets into the crowd, while some “yellow vests” responded by throwing pieces of pavement, broken glass and construction equipment they had set afire at the riot police units.

Police authorities subsequently felt compelled to announce a pro forma investigation amid outrage of widely circulated videos of the police assault, including one where a policeman savagely beats a protester who is lying motionless on the street, his head covered in blood.

At least sixty protesters were arrested as clashes continued late into the evening throughout the area around the station, after groups of “yellow vests” managed to force their way out of the police blockade, chanting “Revolution” and “Macron resign.”



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