From Germany, farmers' protests erupt across France and Europe

Alex Lantier
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After mass farmers' protests in Germany saw tractors blockading avenues in Berlin, similar large actions by farmers have spread to France and across Europe. Anger is exploding over the consequences of the US-NATO war with Russia in Ukraine and speculation driven by financial markets, agribusiness firms and the European Union (EU). Revenues for farmers have plummeted, even as workers cut back on meals as food prices surged internationally.

Mass farmers' protests have hit France, Poland and Romania and are being prepared in Spain. Farmers in Poland and Romania have blockaded their countries' borders with Ukraine to demand subsidies, as cheap Ukrainian grain imports flood local markets. In Spain, farmers have announced plans to blockade the Ministry of Agriculture next month. This week, similar protests spread across France, setting up the most road blockades since the 2018-19 "yellow vest" protests.

Coming amid a powerful German railway strike and strikes being called against France's fascistic immigration law, the European farmers' protests reflects mounting popular opposition internationally to NATO and the EU. The decisive issue, as in the "yellow vest" protests, is linking this movement to a broader struggle against capitalism by the working class. Only the mobilization of the full social power of the working class can end the wars and the financial speculation that are strangling rural workers.

Protests in France started in the southwest as farmers blockaded roads to protest low prices they were being offered for their produce while having to pay mandated price increases on diesel fuel. This was one of the key issues that provoked farmers' protests in Germany, whose government slashed agricultural fuel subsidies to balance its budget as it spends hundreds of billions of euros on rearmament against Russia.

Farmers blockaded several highways in the Occitanie region around Toulouse. This week, the protests rapidly spread across the southwest and also to the Drôme department north of Marseille, to Beauvais and the Picardy region north of Paris and to Brest in the western peninsula of Brittany.

A farmer, Alexandra Sonac, was killed on a road blockade in the Ariège department south of Toulouse, when a car drove through her road blockade early Tuesday morning, running over Sonac, her daughter and her husband. Sonac's daughter died yesterday, though her husband is expected to survive. The driver of the car, identified as an Armenian national facing expulsion orders by French police, is being charged with involuntary homicide.

Significantly, farmers' protests are escalating outside the control of the farmers' associations that hold talks with the capitalist state: the National Federation of Unions of Agricultural Owners (FNSEA), the Rural Coordination and the Peasant Confederation. These organizations did not give an order either for the initial blockade of the Toulouse-Bayonne highway that started the protests, nor for the blockades of key A6 and A7 highways, cutting off traffic between France's three largest cities, Paris, Lyon and Marseille.

On Tuesday and Wednesday, leaders of the farmers' associations met with newly-installed French Prime Minister Gabriel Attal and promised their membership that they would find "hundreds of millions of euros" to deal with the problems facing farmers.

Anger continued to mount, however, and farmers' protests spread and received support from taxi drivers who mounted go-slow operations in Toulouse and Bordeaux. Farmers protesting yesterday outside the police prefecture in Agen covered it in manure and torched the façade of the building.

Today, protests are expected in 85 of France's 100 departments and also in cities, including Lyon, Bordeaux, Amiens, Orange, Bourges, Bayonne, Agen, Périgueux and Angoulême.

There are also indications that, as in Germany, farmers could soon blockade the national capital. FNSEA President Arnaud Rousseau went on France2 television yesterday to warn of a "historically unprecedented explosion of the agricultural community," attacked "violence, because sometimes it is not very far away," and added that

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blockading Paris was “not an option” he was considering. However, convoys of dozens of tractors are reportedly converging on Paris, both from Picardy to the north and from the Essonne department to the south.

The farmers’ protests have provoked a deep crisis in the French government. Polls show 85 percent of the French population support the farmers’ protests and that 56 percent already support increasing farm subsidies to help them. Attal has held crisis talks with agricultural confederations for two days, but he has made no announcement of what policies he will propose.

France’s fascistic Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin has told farmers that he wants to “politically support them while encouraging them to respect public property” and suggested that he would not order riot police to attack them, hypocritically claiming: “I do not send CRS [riot police] against people who are suffering.” In reality, the Interior Ministry has already sent riot police to monitor farmers in the south and will likely prepare large-scale security measures should protests reach the center of Paris, as they did during the “yellow vest” movement.

Agriculture Minister Marc Fesneau has indicated that the government will take a hard line against the farmers, saying he would “not take the road of demagogy or the easy way out” in talks with their representatives. As he met with Attal for talks, Fesneau added that he would indicate his policy “in the coming days,” telling *Le Monde*, “We have to go forward modestly, that is my style.”

Top officials in the farmers’ confederations have criticized the government and called on it to announce urgent measures to try to end the movement. Rural Coordination President Véronique Le Floch called the government’s failure to make any concrete announcement “catastrophic,” adding, “We were at least expecting [from the government] an announcement on Non-Road Diesel (GNR) financing and on funding for agriculture, which faces unprecedented sanitary crises.”

Farmers must be warned: Neither capitalist governments nor associations who negotiate with them have their interests at heart. Farmers are a significant social force. France has 390,000 farms of various sizes, from industrial farms to very small operations, where farmers retire on poverty pensions of barely €400 per month. However, farmers face a ruling class determined to transfer hundreds of billions of euros to the war machine and bank bailouts for the super-rich at the expense of food for the people. In this struggle, the farmers’ best ally is the working class.

Like the German government, Macron has pledged to increase military spending by over €100 billion before 2030. The measure he used to fund this program to escalate France’s wars in Africa and NATO’s war with Russia was last year’s massively unpopular pension cut. Ruling overtly against the people, Macron sent riot police to attack strikes and protests by millions of workers in France. Ultimately, he relied on the union bureaucracies to shut down the protest movement and get the pension cuts and military spending increases passed.

Farmers now are protesting against the EU’s conditioning of Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) subsidies to farmers’ rapid implementation of the EU’s so-called “Farm-to-Fork” program. This program calls for vast cuts to the use of diesel fuel, the use of nitrate-based fertilizers, and the size of ranchers’ herds in order to minimize the output of greenhouse gases that hurt the climate. However, EU officials decided on the plan without giving farmers sufficient aid and with manifest contempt for the food supply of the population.

Authoritative studies of the Farm-to-Fork program have found that it will trigger a collapse in EU food production and consumption and a deep crisis in European farming. A 2020 US Department of Commerce study found that it could lead to an 11 percent fall in production and a 17 percent increase in food prices. A 2021 University of Kiel study predicted a 16 percent fall in production and prices rising 12 percent for grain, 36 percent for milk and 42 percent for meat.

There is plenty of money for everyone to eat and work and to find ways to produce food in a way that does not harm the environment. However, this money must be impounded from trillion-euro bank bailouts and the reckless military budgets of the EU warmongers. This involves uniting the farmers behind a struggle of the working class to bring down the EU and its capitalist member governments, take power and build the United Socialist States of Europe.

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