

Protesting French farmers threaten to blockade Paris

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After 85 of France's 101 departments saw road blockades by protesting farmers on Thursday, the Paris regional organisations of the National Federation of Agricultural Operators' Unions (FNSEA) and the Young Farmers called Thursday afternoon for a "blockade of Paris" to begin at 2 p.m. Friday. Before the announcement, groups of farmers from Picardy and Essonne were already on their way to the capital to blockade its major roads, including the A1, A15, A13, A10, A11 and A6 motorways.

The farmers' movement in France is part of a pan-European revolt of farmers against a lowering of the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) subsidies and increases in diesel tax which will drastically eat into farmers' abilities to sustain themselves and their livelihoods. Farmers also fear the impact of cheap food imports, particularly Ukrainian grain, on the price of the goods they produce. After German farmers occupied Berlin for hours on January 15, similar protests have since spread to France, Belgium, and Poland. Farmers' protests are also planned in Spain.

On Thursday, French President Emmanuel Macron's new government, led by recently-appointed Prime Minister Gabriel Attal, held an emergency meeting to plan its response. Attal is due to announce his government's propositions at a press conference in the southern department of Haute-Garonne this afternoon.

The European Commission also brought forward a planned conference on agriculture, which opened on Thursday, as the ruling class scrambles to prevent the protests from spreading further. They are desperate to continue funneling hundreds of billions of euros into war with Russia, even as farmers struggle to make ends meet and workers cut back on basic food consumption.

The announcement of the blockade of Paris was an

embarrassing U-turn for the French farmers' unions' leaders. Less than 24 hours before the unions' official endorsement of the march on Paris, FNSEA chief Arnaud Rousseau said "at this stage" there weren't plans to blockade Paris. Arnaud Gaillot, head of the Young Farmers, described calls to blockade the country to defeat Macron as a "last resort."

The union leaders are not leading events, but desperately trying to hold back popular anger and divert it into non-threatening channels. They are engaged in a delicate balancing act, trying to rein in farmers' actions whilst trying to avoid losing all credibility with their members. They only gave the plans to blockade Paris their stamp of approval once it was already too late to stop.

In the final analysis, the farmers' unions serve a similar function as the major French trade union bureaucracies, who have assisted Macron's attacks on their members by subordinating popular opposition to "social dialogue" with the president.

The allegiance of the farmers' unions to the capitalist state oppressing their members has been expressed most sharply by Luc Smessaert, the vice-president of the FNSEA. Smessaert denounced protesting farmers who burned tires in front of the local government office in Agen. Smessaert stated on FranceInfo, "What happened in Agen is unacceptable. We must not attack property."

For many protesting farmers, it is not just a question of opposing the announced changes, but fighting against the existing conditions which have left them hanging on to their farms by a thread. Interviews taken at protests across France expose the impossible situation already facing smaller farmers, which will only be drastically worsened with the new regulations.

Pierre Boissou explained the impact of the continuous

reduction in CAP subsidies: “In one year, we have lost €12,000 net. We manage to earn between €1,000 and €1,500 a month, for 70 hours work a week.”

Cyril Cottin, a farmer from Séreilhac who joined the protests independently of a union to block roundabouts at Aixe-Sur-Vienne, said 18 years ago he earned €1,000 per month from his cattle farm, but now he earns just €800.

Damien Bihan, who brought his tractor to a roadblock in Brittany, explained the difficulties of taking loans for new farm equipment following the hike in interest rates: “To stay in the game, you have to keep investing. When I started, the rate for a bank loan rate was 1 percent. Today, it’s 5 percent. Asking for €300,000 costs €50,000 more than when I started. You have to live with that pressure.”

France is the European Union’s largest agricultural producer, accounting for 18 percent of the bloc’s overall production. Of the European-wide agricultural fund spending of €58.27 billion, the French agricultural sector receives €9.5 billion. Subsidies have collapsed in recent years, particularly after accounting for the vast surge in inflation. According to Agriculture Atlas, subsidies for French farmers peaked in 2005 at €10.4 billion, adjusted for inflation this would be €15.67 billion euros today. In real terms, subsidies have decreased over a third.

Furthermore, a huge portion of the subsidies goes to the pockets of large agribusiness corporations, many of which have profited from buying off land from smaller farmers who could no longer afford to stay in business. In 2010, 80 percent of CAP subsidies for France went to large corporations and charitable organisations.

The Macron government’s Thursday emergency meeting no doubt discussed how to ram through EU measures without bringing far wider layers of the population, including the working class, into struggle. On Thursday, fishermen in Rennes joined protesting farmers outside the region’s prefecture to protest a months-long ban on fishing on France’s Atlantic Coast.

After months of mass anti-government struggles in 2023, less than one month into 2024 an explosive confrontation is emerging between farmers and growing layers of the working population, on one side, and Macron’s increasingly fascistic police-state regime on the other.

The Macron government is terrified that the conflict with the farmers could reignite the anti-government struggles waged by millions of French workers in 2023. Last April, millions marched against Macron, workers in critical industries launched wildcat strikes and two-thirds of the population were in favour of a general strike to defeat Macron’s pension reform. Last weekend, tens of thousands of people marched against the president’s fascistic anti-immigration law prepared with the far-right National Rally party of Marine Le Pen.

Workers and youth opposed to Macron’s government must prepare their own intervention in the struggle initiated by the farmers. Small farmers cannot live amid the monopolization of financial resources by the bank bailouts and the building up of the war machine against Russia. Only a struggle by European workers to expropriate the trillions of euros that today are wasted on bank bailouts and imperialist war can create a reliable, ecologically sustainable food supply that meets the social needs of both workers and farmers.

Above all, workers cannot wait for the national union bureaucracies to initiate the battle against Macron and the EU. These bureaucracies—as last year’s pension protests made clear—oppose a fight to bring down Macron. From the outset, defending the farmers’ struggles that are spreading across Europe requires constructing an international movement and fighting organizations in the working class to wage a struggle for power and for a socialist revolution across Europe.



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