

“If the government doesn’t give in, this will explode”

Farmers’ protests paralyze France and spread across Europe

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Protesting farmers set up dozens of road blockades on major highways surrounding cities in France and Belgium yesterday. The protests came together with renewed mass farmers’ protests in Germany. Farmers with 1,500 tractors blockaded roads around Hamburg, the country’s largest port, to protest fuel subsidy cuts as the German government hikes military spending and slashes agricultural subsidies amid the NATO war with Russia in Ukraine.

Farmers set up road blockades around Brussels, Liège and Namur in Belgium, with participation from French- and Flemish-speaking farmers, and in cities across France. Lyon, Marseille, Toulouse, Bordeaux, Lille and many smaller cities saw farmers’ blockades disrupting supplies and creating traffic jams. These were intensified by go-slow operations by taxi drivers protesting a sudden tax increase announced by the French government on their revenue for driving the sick to hospitals.

Members of the National Federation of Unions of Agricultural Owners (FNSEA) have pledged to “besiege” Paris, rejecting minor concessions made last week by newly-installed Prime Minister Gabriel Attal. The Attal government is in a deep crisis and has ordered 15,000 cops to be prepared to impose law and order on the farmers. Armored vehicles of the French military police were deployed yesterday around Paris-area airports and the critical food distribution center at Rungis.

WSWS reporters interviewed protesting farmers on road blockades outside of Paris, who stressed the impossible situation facing their small businesses amid war, economic crisis and the European Union’s “Green Deal” reforms of Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) farm subsidies.

Vincent, a farmer who works north of Paris, told the WSWS: “I don’t think we should trust the first

statements, which are made to quiet us down. Then there is the requirement that 4 percent of the land lie fallow. Today in the world, many people are dying of hunger, and France is a country where it is pretty easy to grow wheat. Refusing to grow on 4 percent of the land area is crazy. The state should have us grow wheat for food aid, food pantries, things like that.”

He pointed to the devastating impact on European farmers of surging inflation after the pandemic bailouts and the outbreak of the NATO-Russia war in Ukraine. He said, “All of our input costs are going up. Products to protect plants, fungicides, and then we pay so many taxes. Fertilizer costs are surging, and you will have seen that the cost of living generally is rising. And if we hire someone, wages and social benefits cost more.”

Vincent also criticized France’s pension system, which sees some farmers retire on as little as €400 per month: “The farmers’ pension system is a scandal. There are good harvests, bad harvests, we pay in and we get points towards our retirement. But when we have a good year, the number of points we can get, even if we pay in a lot, is limited. So we never get a good pension, even when we have a great harvest.

“France is a champion of imposing stricter norms than other countries,” he added, criticizing the incoherence of banning pesticides, genetically modified crops and fertilizers at home in France, while importing food grown with them elsewhere. The recent signing of free trade deals with Latin America, he added, had caused a lot of anger among French farmers.

“If you go to Morocco, the United States, Brazil or Israel, you have much less regulation of health, fertilizer, staffing. They can do things we can’t,” he said. “They have industrial farms with 50,000 cows in Argentina. In France, if there is a farm with 1,000 cows, immediately

it's a scandal. Over there, it's 50,000. And then they have soybean fields for feed right next door with genetically modified crops. If that is what we want to eat, then it should be authorized in France. If that is not what we want to eat, then there is no point signing free trade agreements."

Vincent criticized the EU's "Green Deal" directives to cut European farm production and meat consumption. "So my daughter is 18. She said, 'Dad, we should eat less meat.' So I said, 'Let's look at the quantity of meat the WHO recommends.' In fact, we were barely eating the recommended levels. So they shouldn't say, 'Everyone should eat less meat.' The people who say that are eating in fancy restaurants in the ministries. But you or me, we eat little portions, because cafeterias are cutting meat to cut costs."

He stressed the vast anger building against the French government. "If the government doesn't move, things will explode. Things can go further, much further," he said. "Our unions are trying to negotiate with the government to limit as much as possible all the bureaucratic busywork. ... But if what they get is not enough, indeed, there will be a rebellion from below."

Asked by WSWS reporters whether he would support a broader struggle by the working class and a general strike to bring down the French and EU governments, Vincent shrugged and said: "That's the dream of the communists, to unify all the struggles to bring down the system."

WSWS reporters also spoke to Grégoire Bouillon, a FNSEA regional official for the Paris area. Bouillon explained, "The model of family farming is tending to disappear. ... We need resources so that farmers can continue to live from agriculture." Current EU directives tying farm subsidies to extensive ecological regulations, he said, "are too restrictive and economically unviable."

Bouillon insisted that farmers care about the environment and climate change, but they need more coordination and resources to deal with it. "Climate change impacts us every day. What we want is tools to adapt, on production methods, climate-resistant crops, chemical protection methods against insects or fungi, and more investment in research and development."

Asked about farmers' protests spreading from Poland and Germany to Belgium, France and Spain, Bouillon said: "The EU went too fast, too far in cutting agricultural production. And that, farmers cannot tolerate it anymore. If we are told to cut the volume we produce, the prices we are paid have to go up. Otherwise, our profitability collapses. ... So I think the European system has reached

the end of its rope. There is a European agricultural movement to expose and denounce this insanity."

Yesterday afternoon and evening, President Emmanuel Macron held an emergency meeting of the ministerial cabinet. Yesterday evening, Attal held a three and a half hour meeting with top officials of the FNSEA and other farmers' union bureaucracies, which ended without announcing any further measures to help the farmers.

Attal will reportedly detail further measures on agriculture this evening, in his formal declaration of his incoming government's policy in a speech before the National Assembly.

Beyond taxi drivers, truck drivers and broader layers of workers are also considering entering into struggle against Macron alongside the farmers. Yesterday, unions in the Paris public transport network announced that they were giving legal authorization for strike action starting on February 1. A year after millions of workers struck against Macron's illegitimate pension cuts in the greatest strikes in France since the May 1968 general strike, France and Europe are again on the verge of a social explosion.

Yesterday, the far-right Unity-SGP trade union representing the riot police issued an appeal on its website to the government to calm the situation. Unity-SGP union secretary Jean-Christophe Couvy called on the "government to find a social fire extinguisher, put out the fire and try to calm the situation." Couvy warned that "other professions could get involved," which could "paralyze the system."

The crisis in France and Europe can only be resolved based on the mobilization of workers across Europe and internationally against the NATO-Russia war and for the rational use of humanity's resources based on the principle of social equality. This requires first and foremost preparing a general strike by the working class to bring down the Macron government and its EU allies. The perspective to guide such a movement is the struggle to transfer power to the working class and build the United Socialist States of Europe.



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