

Mass mobilisation of youth and “Yellow Vests” shakes the French government

WSWS reporting team
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Masses of people demonstrated across France yesterday against the repression of the high school movement and the rising prices of energy and the cost of living. As anger mounts against the mass arrests of high school students and the injuries inflicted on them by the police, clashes broke out between demonstrators and the police. In many cities, the police were overwhelmed by the influx of demonstrators.

Late last night, the Interior Ministry revised its own estimates of the mobilisation, as well as those of the inter-union alliance, upwards from 400,000 people across France to 550,000. It reported 110,000 demonstrators in Paris, 35,000 in Montpellier, 32,000 in Toulouse, and 20,000 each in Nantes and Lyon. Local organisers reported 80,000 people mobilised in Lille, 30,000 each in Rennes and Caen, 20,000 in Strasbourg, 10,000 each in Brest and Besançon, and 800,000 in total across France.

These figures still fall short of reality. In Bordeaux, the prefecture put forward a figure of 7,000 demonstrators, while the CGT counted 100,000. A similar number demonstrated in Marseille, and hundreds of thousands in Paris. Altogether, as demonstrations of millions of people over housing shake Spain and mass strikes against austerity take place in Belgium, Portugal and Ireland, the number of demonstrators in France yesterday was no doubt in the millions.

If a general strike to bring down Macron and halt social austerity and the escalation of wars in Europe has not already taken place, it is not for lack of will to fight. It is because of the opposition and sabotage of the trade union bureaucracies and their political allies, such as Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s La France Insoumise. The inter-union alliance has scheduled only a one-day action for November 5, in an attempt to space out and slow down the rise of the class struggle and prevent a revolutionary confrontation between the workers and a hated French government.

The central task remains to prepare and organise the working class independently of the trade union apparatuses, in action committees, to prepare the general strike that the bureaucracies are trying to prevent. Already, however, the

situation is turning into a confrontation with the state apparatus. Demonstrators burned down Limoges city hall, burst into the city halls of Marseille and Lille, and ransacked the residence of the police prefect in Bordeaux. Police pushed back marches heading towards the city halls of Toulouse and Metz, as well as towards the Elysée Palace in Paris.

The leaders of the government and of the parliamentary parties have all, each in their own way, expressed their fear of and opposition to the movement. Macron pledged that “we will all stand together against those who sow chaos.” Bruno Retailleau, for the Republicans (LR), denounced the “unprecedented intensity” of the demonstrations and called for the “implacable force of the state” and “prison” for the demonstrators.

Mélenchon is not calling for the mobilisation of his millions of voters and of the workers for a general strike and a revolutionary struggle. On X, he said blandly that there were “Lots of people everywhere, calm and cheerful everywhere when the police aren’t there.” Above all, he complained that police repression had “opened the door to chaos,” denounced “the looting, the ransacking,” and insisted: “We must refuse to take part in actions that have no political meaning and are contrary to our methods.”

For the neo-fascist National Rally (RN), Marine Le Pen denounced demonstrations “taken hostage by the far left” that “seek to plunge the country into chaos.” In reality, yesterday’s mass mobilisation was not a conspiracy by the leaders of the apparatuses that the mainstream media pass off as “the far left” in France and elsewhere across Europe. It was rather an attempt by workers and youth to free themselves from them through struggle.

In Paris, demonstrators told the WSWS of their opposition to the mass arrests and the maiming of high school demonstrators, their anger at rising prices, especially of energy, and more broadly their opposition to war, the police state and the capitalist oligarchy. Many demonstrators carried the Algerian flag to mark the massacre of Algerian demonstrators by the Paris police on October 17, 1961,

during the Algerian war of independence.

Augustin, a “yellow vest” and bicycle repairman, said he was demonstrating in support of the high school students and against economic inequality: “Over Macron’s 10 years, the average French person has lost 4 to 5 percent in purchasing power on their wages. And Bernard Arnault has multiplied his fortune by four. We’ve seen a very right-wing liberal policy. Employer contributions are at their lowest in 10 years. The wealth tax was abolished. Billionaires, proportionally, are taxed less than we are.”

Augustin stressed his opposition to war, particularly as the wars against Russia and Iran are cutting off access to oil and gas and sending prices soaring: “We have to de-escalate the war, and we should cut the size of the army, we should reduce our armed forces, because... if our goal is to create world peace, that doesn’t come through increasing military resources.”

He said he hoped that Mélenchon’s election in the 2027 presidential election could change things, but that he would mobilise if a Mélenchon presidency disappointed him: “If Mélenchon betrays us, we’ll take to the streets ten times stronger. Because in fact, he’s our last hope... For me, Mélenchon is a stage, not a goal. It’s really not the end.”

Ethan, a student, said: “The national education system is completely falling apart. Workers in France are mistreated. Capital—we’re giving huge gifts to capital while we don’t value labour. The middle class and the working classes are getting hammered. It’s a disgrace, so we’re here because we want to say we don’t want this.” He added, “I’m not in contact with the unions, I don’t have the information, but I think it’s shameful. The people manage to organise themselves faster than the unions, which have power and organisational resources.”

Arthur carried a flag bearing the Cross of Lorraine, not out of French chauvinism but out of anti-fascism and to give left-wing content to the memory of the Resistance: “The Cross of Lorraine was the symbol of Free France, of the Resistance that fought against the Nazis, against the fascists in the 1940s. And today, we see this symbol being sullied by people engaged in Holocaust denial. It’s important to reclaim this symbol; it remains a strong symbol of anti-fascism... I’m trying to give it back a left-wing content.”

Coline told the WWS: “I’m a high school student and I’m here in support of all the disadvantaged high schools. There’s also a convergence of struggles with everything to do with inflation, the price of diesel, the price of everything in France really, and also with the police repression of our previous mobilisations. ... The government in power should get out, because it’s not a good government, it absolutely doesn’t listen to the people.”

When the WWS observed that her placard called the

government “Pétain’s dogs,” after the collaborationist dictator during the Second World War, Coline replied: “Clearly.” The WWS recalled that the Resistance had been a European insurrectionary movement based above all in the working class, and that an international movement is developing across Europe and the world, once again opening the way to a general strike and a revolutionary struggle. Coline said she agreed with the perspective of the international revolutionary mobilisation of the workers.

The current movement, she said, “is also a movement at the level of social class, because when you look, now there are the ultra-rich, and they have never been so rich in France compared to the rest of the population. So it also has to be a social class struggle, not just high school social movements, etc. We also need to revolt against the ultra-rich and the billionaires. So yes, it strongly echoes the Resistance that came before, because it has to be a movement of the working class.”

She added, “So I’d like there to be a revolution, a real revolution and—it’s a bit harsh—but for everything to be overturned, for us to have a new system.”

The mass mobilisations of the high school movement in France and of workers and youth across Europe are opening the way to such an outcome. The capitalist governments, for their part, will not stop war, repression or the rise of dictatorship. In France, the bourgeoisie is instead promising an escalation of repression, with the police having already arrested more than 2,000 people at yesterday’s demonstrations and nearly 8,000 since the start of the movement. A demonstrator had his hand torn off by a police grenade in Saint-Étienne, and the toll of yesterday’s repression remains unknown

The prospect of a general strike, as in May 1968, is almost unanimously shared among the demonstrators. Such a movement must now be prepared, and the working class must be prepared for the revolutionary tasks that would flow from it. This requires bringing together the youth and workers already mobilised, in France and the rest of Europe, in action committees, to go to the workplaces and call on workers to mobilise more broadly. The task is to mobilise in a general strike against imperialist war, austerity and dictatorship, which will pose the necessity of taking power away from the capitalist oligarchies and transferring it to the workers.



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