French youth, yellow vests march as unions coordinate strikes with Macron

WSWS reporters
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On November 7, for the fourth consecutive Saturday, high school students, university students, workers and Yellow Vests demonstrated across France against the rising cost of living. They were responding to a call by the Yellow Vest Coordination and youth organizations. The Interior Ministry counted 146,000 protesters, including 46,000 in Paris, while the youth inter-union alliance claimed 250,000, including 75,000 in Paris.

Where the unions published their own figures, they were higher than those of the prefectures. In Bordeaux, the CGT counted 40,000 protesters, against 9,100 according to the state. In Grenoble, it counted 20,000, against 6,000 according to the prefecture. In Rennes, Sud Solidaires counted 10,000, the prefecture 5,500. Thousands also marched in Lille, Marseille, Toulouse, Nantes, Montpellier and Lyon, often in defiance of prefectoral orders banning gatherings.

The state mobilized some 70,000 police and gendarmes. The Interior Ministry reported 360 arrests. In Paris, police arrested the spokespeople of the Yellow Vest Coordination, Benjamin Ball and Azelma Sigaux, in front of the National Assembly and placed them in police custody. In Toulouse, the prefecture announced 24 arrests and detentions after attacking a banned rally with tear gas.

On Monday, the union leaderships met Prime Minister Sébastien Lecornu to set the next one-day strike with the government. Having waited since September to organize a first cross-industry strike on November 5, they proposed a strike on the 17th, except for the CFDT, which did not call for any further strike action. The union leaders took this decision in an attempt to keep dictating the pace of the mobilization together with the government and to prevent an uncontrolled social explosion.

Workers and youth will not be able to stop austerity, war and the rise of police dictatorship and the far right without breaking from the union bureaucracies and linking their struggles to those developing across Europe. The one-day strikes planned in Spain, Italy and Greece, and the youth mobilization against military service in Germany, reveal the radicalization under way. Workers and youth must organize with the rank and file, in action committees, to free the class struggle from the grip of the bureaucracies.

Only in this way will they be able to bypass the coordination between the union apparatuses and the capitalist state and prepare a genuine European general strike. This would open the way to a struggle to break the diktat of the capitalist oligarchy and to fight for workers' power and socialism.

WSWS reporters intervened at the Paris demonstration on Place de la République on Saturday to interview protesters. They spoke to Robin, a student who explained that she is "anti-capitalist" and mobilized against the police state, but not a member of any party in France.

She said, "I had gone to a demonstration a little while ago, the one on the carrying of weapons [by the police—Ed.]. I had really been confronted with police violence, actually, and it completely outraged me. And I came back to demonstrate about that. … And I'm not in high school anymore, but I was, and the working conditions, how we students were treated in terms of mental health, the infrastructure. Nothing was right."

Robin stressed her anger at the official legitimization of the far right, founded by former Nazi SS members and by Jean-Marie Le Pen, a Holocaust denier and torturer in Algeria. "I feel like everyone is forgetting that we're talking about people who were Nazis … that there were Algerians who were tortured, who were electrocuted," she said, before adding: "The scale of the crimes—I don't understand how it's normalized today, how nobody talks about it, why nobody speaks out about it louder."

She added that, like many protesters, she was mobilized against the economic and social crisis: "Prices going up, that makes no sense at all. Families who can't afford a normal

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life, you can't have a dignified life for reasons of money. … There are people here to protest against the Palestinian genocide, and I agree with them too, honestly."

Lucas, a welder and street medic at the Paris demonstrations, said the police repression of the protests "is far too heavy … On October 17, we did nine stretcher evacuations. At the little café up there, we had set up a small first-aid point. We put all the seriously injured there, and then we evacuated them … It was LBDs [rubber-bullet launchers], batons, and we dealt with quite a few head injuries. We treated a lot of trauma."

He also voiced his anger at police violence targeting street medics during the October 17 demonstration: "A guy fell to the ground. The medic came to help him. There was a CRS [riot police] charge. And he flew into a rage and went after the CRS. And he got hit by a counter-charge, and they beat him to a pulp. All I saw was the medic lying unconscious."

Lucas stressed his enthusiasm for the emerging European mobilization of workers and youth and for the demands it is raising: "There should be a convergence of all the countries, a common solution, because what's being demanded is what we all want to do."

When WSWS reporters raised the need to build action committees to unify struggles across Europe and wage them independently of the union apparatuses, Lucas expressed his disillusionment with the union leaderships: "All that's left is to scream; they don't see any further than the end of their noses."

The solution, he said, is that "all the high school students, all the demands, that we get heard." But he stressed that this could not happen under President Emmanuel Macron, and that he supported calls to block the economy to bring Macron down: "He has to go. He's useless now."

Finally, the WSWS spoke to a group of friends, Apolline, Camille and Chloé, students and workers who had come to demonstrate. Apolline explained: "The repression against high school students is absolutely disgusting. They're mobilizing for their rights, and they get beaten, they get maimed. The right to demonstrate is written into the Constitution, after all; that's what we have to respect. And the government doesn't give a damn about the demonstrations. In the end, their only answer is repression. And this time, we're saying no."

Camille added that she also opposes the militarization of the French economy: "The cost of the budget for these wars … personally, I think this money could be put somewhere else."

She stressed her support for the international character of the movement now developing among workers: "Seeing that in Europe, in the world, people are rising up a bit, that's good too, because it legitimizes the whole movement and gives it scope beyond our borders … I think it can also scare everyone a bit to see the youth rising up."

She pointed to the calls for a European youth demonstration on November 21: "The mobilization took place on the 21st, at the European level. I think that's very good … And maybe it will make people understand internationally that no, everything is not fine, even if we're in Europe."

She also voiced doubts, however, about whether this struggle could develop within the framework of the union bureaucracies: "I don't know if it can take off only through the union movements; it's probably that they're not necessarily for the same things … The goal is still for everyone to mobilize for one thing, that is, a society that works, for everyone. Some unions, I think, aren't ready for that."

When the WSWS pointed out that the French union bureaucracies are largely financed by works councils and by the state, she replied: "There are conflicts of interest, obviously. And it goes along with the overrepresentation of the far right and the ultra-rich in the media."

She agreed when WSWS reporters said that a European general strike would be needed to block the economy and bring down Macron: "I think we're going to be forced to get there if our demands aren't heard more fully. So, if it comes to that, let what must be done be done. … The economy as it is now is bound to collapse at some point. We're close to economic crises that have already happened before, and that have already produced crashes in the past."

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