

France shaken by mass protests

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On Saturday, protests against French President Emmanuel Macron's fuel tax hike saw an elemental outpouring of pent-up anger against social inequality. After a series of calls for protests and road blockades in social media in recent weeks, 287,710 people wearing yellow vests joined 2,034 blockades and go-slow operations across France. Last night, tens of thousands were still protesting a measure that would break the monthly budgets of workers commuting to their jobs.

They are part of an international wave of protests spreading across Europe. In Belgium, protesters are blockading oil refineries in solidarity with the French protests, while fuel tax protests have also erupted in Bulgaria and Serbia. Amid an upsurge of the class struggle in Europe, there are ferry strikes and a public sector strike against the pro-austerity Syriza government in Greece; the Bucharest metro strike; and Amazon and Ryanair strikes in Germany and across the continent.

Broad opposition to existing social conditions is mounting. "For the average Frenchman who works and gets a wage, it is getting really hard. ... We are proud to pay our taxes, but this is too much," one protester told BFM TV. He added that he is opposing problems that accumulated "over decades," to cries of "Macron resign" from protesters holding signs saying "No to the president of the rich."

Three-quarters of French people support the protests, amid anger at austerity, Macron's cuts to pensions, and his decision to tax workers while slashing the Tax on Wealth (ISF) on millionaires.

"The fuel tax was the feather that broke the camel's back, but it goes far beyond that," protesters near Marseille told the WSW. "We are sure there are other solutions, we are tired of being led by private interests. We would like a return to democracy, wage increases, cuts in taxes paid by working people, the right to cast blank votes and to decide on all important laws via referendums. We are sure there are many solutions.

The population must take back political power."

The movement is socially heterogeneous, drawing in workers, independent truck drivers and small businessmen. While there are undoubtedly politically reactionary elements among the demonstrators, they constitute a small minority. The attempts by the union bureaucracy to blackguard these protests as a far-right provocation are politically slanderous. The real purpose of lying misrepresentations of the mass demonstration is to justify the efforts of the reactionary trade unions to suppress and discredit opposition to the government.

The Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT) union distributed leaflets at workplaces calling on workers not to join blockades; CGT boss Philippe Martinez said he would not join the protests, claiming they are led by the far right: "The CGT cannot march alongside such parties and individuals. ... They are not our model, we will not march alongside them."

Insofar as there is a danger of right-wing or far-right forces profiting from the protests, this is above all because the organizations presenting themselves as "left" support Macron. This allows the right to posture as the sole opposition to a French president who is seen as a symbol of austerity and militarism across Europe. Just this spring, the CGT effectively isolated and strangled the rail workers' strike against the privatization of the National Railways (SNCF), calling for an end to the strike despite 95 percent opposition among rail workers to Macron's attack on the SNCF.

Now, as mass opposition erupts outside the usual trade union channels, the entire ruling elite, both right and supposedly "left," is in shock and fears that the movement will take on an ever more working-class character. Macron, who only last week lavished praise on the fascist Marshal Pétain, who ruled France between 1940 and 1942 on behalf of Hitler, is hostile and impervious to protesters' demands. Traveling to Berlin to meet German Chancellor Angela Merkel and discuss plans for a European army, at a cost of €300

billion to French taxpayers by 2023, Macron took no questions on the protests.

Speaking on the protests in a France2 TV interview yesterday evening, Prime Minister Édouard Philippe pledged to maintain the fuel tax hike: “The course we have set, we will continue to follow it. It is not when the wind starts blowing that you change course.” He denounced the Yellow Vests, saying that they produced “scenes that look like anarchy.”

Macron’s opponent in the 2017 elections, neo-fascist Marine Le Pen, did not seek to whip up more protests but called on him to back down, so that the protest can be rapidly brought to a close: “75 percent of Frenchmen supported and support this movement, which should encourage the government to be modest and take rapid decisions. ... I encourage the government to show it gets the message and take decisions that bring back peace.”

As for the various political allies of the CGT, who initially reacted with disinterest and hostility to the protest calls on social media, they are only trying to arrange a political mechanism to get the eruption of social opposition back under control.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon called for the “success” of the protests on his blog only after his Unsubmissive France (LFI) party held an internal debate over whether to back fuel taxes on ecological grounds, and LFI official Clémentine Autain announced that she would not attend the protests. The Pabloite New Anticapitalist Party (NPA), for its part, called on “trade unions, NGOs and political parties to continue the struggle” launched by the Yellow Vests.

In fact, the central lesson from Saturday’s protest is that, amid growing social anger across Europe, genuine opposition can only emerge outside of the stranglehold of the union bureaucracies and their political allies, such as LFI and the NPA in France. Now that such opposition has emerged, it is critical that it not be suppressed. The questions of building workers’ organizations of struggle independent of the unions, and building a vanguard in the working class raising the question of political power, are decisive.

Much can be learned from the struggles of the 1930s. In his article “Committees Of Action—Not People’s Front,” written less than a year before the eruption of the 1936 French general strike, Leon Trotsky stressed the critical question of the independent organization of

the struggles of the working class:

The greatest danger in France lies in the fact that the revolutionary energy of the masses will be dissipated in spurts, in isolated explosions ... and give way to apathy. Only conscious traitors or hopeless muddle-heads are capable of thinking that in the present situation it is possible to hold the masses immobilized up to the moment when they will be blessed from above by the government ... The task of the proletarian party consists not in checking and paralyzing these movements but in unifying them and investing them with the greatest possible force.

Amid a renewed upsurge of the international class struggle, this appeal acquires intense political relevance.

But the most critical issue of all is the construction of a Marxist leadership in the French and European working class. Only in this way will it be possible for the growing mass movement to assume a politically conscious socialist character and unify the European working class in struggle against the capitalist system.

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