

Third “yellow vest” protest in France defies government crackdown

By Anthony Torres
3 December 2018

The third Saturday protest held by protesters, clad in yellow vests to show their opposition to French President Emmanuel Macron and his anti-worker policies, spread across France. In downtown Paris, the protesters faced an unprecedented police crackdown, the most violent since May 1968, when police assaults on student demonstrations triggered the French general strike.

The movement is rapidly developing into an international political protest against social inequality, the high cost of living, and the policies of austerity and war across Europe. After protests in France and Belgium, protesters also donned yellow vests to oppose state policies in Maastricht, Nijmegen and The Hague in the Netherlands. In France, protests broke out in Paris, Bordeaux, Rennes, Marseille, Toulouse, Dijon, Nantes, Nice, Strasbourg and Caen. They also took place at many highway toll booths and airports.

French police used violence and mass arrests in a failed attempt to intimidate the participants. Across France, there were 412 arrests, including 287 in Paris, where dozens were wounded. Since Saturday, 378 people have been placed in preventive detention, including 33 minors. In Marseille, where clashes with police lasted until the evening, 21 were arrested.

In Paris, riot police blocked traffic and shut down mass transit across much of the downtown area from 6 a.m., setting up identity checks and systematically searching protesters. At about 9 a.m., a few hours before the protests were scheduled to start, riot police began firing volleys of tear gas and assaulting protesters on the Place de l'Étoile, around the Arc de Triumph, at the western end of the Champs-Élysées avenue.

Protesters chanting “Macron resign” spread into streets adjacent to the Champs-Élysées, where they

were assaulted by police. As they tried to build barricades, riot police responded by firing volleys of tear gas, as well as stun grenades, rubber bullets and water cannon.

Clashes rapidly erupted across the city. Cars, a LCL bank branch, the stock exchange and the Jeu de Paume art museum were burned, and the metal gates of the Tuileries gardens were smashed. Videos posted by protesters on social media showed some carrying out violent acts. These were most likely plainclothes policemen acting as provocateurs. They donned yellow vests and attacked luxury cars or shops, and then moved away to speak calmly and amiably to the police.

WSWS reporters in Paris spoke to “yellow vest” protesters, who came from the far Paris suburbs and from the provinces, to oppose Macron. Pierre said, “I have been protesting since the start of the movement, but not in Paris, because I am from Vesoul in the Saône valley. I am here to protest against Macron and all his new taxes, and all the riot police who are tear-gassing us, though we are trying to protest peacefully. But they are attacking us first. That is not correct.”

Anthony and Marie said that Macron’s resort to police violence showed his own bankruptcy: “When one reaches the point where people are being constantly tear-gassed, or they are being kettled by police because they can find no other way of resolving the matter, it means there has been a total failure. He has totally lost control ... And the more we protest, the worse it gets.”

About the alleged presence of far-right parties among the “yellow vest” demonstrators, an electrician participating in the protests said: “Personally I have not seen them at all. But I think that even if they tried, they would not succeed, because the people are here, and we are sick and tired of always having to deal with the

National Front,” France’s neo-fascist party.

Referring to Macron’s election victory against neo-fascist presidential candidate Marine Le Pen, he added that the prominence of the neo-fascists meant “for example that in election runoffs, we are always forced to vote for someone we don’t want to vote for.”

An ambulance driver said, “The cost of living always rises, but some people are doing great ... like our congressmen who say, ‘I can’t dine on the Champs Elysées for less than 200 euros. I doubled the salaries of my advisors because you can’t live on just 5,000 euros per month.’ Well, then they should give me those 5,000 euros a month, because I can live like a king with that much money.”

On the separate demonstration organised by the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT), in an attempt to divide the workers and prevent some from joining the “yellow vest” protests, the ambulance driver said: “The trade unions are shit, they serve no useful purpose. They are paid for by the state, they do not represent the interests of the workers. ... They are servants of the government, they are paid by the government. That is why I am not a member of any union.”

A former soldier told the WSWS that he opposed wars, and that they were being financed through attacks on basic social spending: “What has happened in Syria is a tragedy, as in the Ivory Coast, too. It’s like the Gulf War that I fought in, which is essentially the same thing: it’s all about looting the wealth of those countries. And then it triggers religious wars between the Sunnis and the Shiites in some countries ... But if there are inter-religious conflicts like that, ultimately it is the fault of the European countries, who colonised those countries for years.”

The ruling class in France and internationally is terrified of the growing “yellow vest” movement, which has received support from striking workers including in the refineries, ports and hospitals, as well as among students. Just as a half century ago, when the police crackdown at the Sorbonne triggered the largest general strike in European history, they fear a mass movement of the working class. While clumsily trying to win over the protesters with meaningless phrases, they also boast that they are planning repression.

Yesterday, Macron called an emergency meeting of the cabinet and of the “relevant services,” after several

of his ministers called on Saturday for the re-imposition of a state of emergency. Macron ordered the Interior Ministry to discuss “the necessity ... of adapting operations for the maintenance of public order in the coming days.”

He also called for Prime Minister Edouard Philippe to meet with all France’s parliamentary parties, acceding to a demand from Marine Le Pen, of the neo-fascist National Rally (RN). She asked Macron “who has let this situation get worse to an incredible extent, to receive the leaders of the opposition parties, the first of whom is the National Rally.”

Interior Minister Christophe Castaner said he had to recognise “objectively” that the government had “badly handled a number of public relations issues.” He added, “Do you want me to tell you that everything is going well and that there are no problems? That would seem idiotic, and above all I don’t want to lie to you.”

Workers should give no credence to the manoeuvres of a police state, which represents the financial aristocracy and is planning a state of emergency, directly targeting social anger in the working class. Mass opposition in France and across Europe is emerging with explosive force. The only way forward is the mobilisation of workers throughout France and the development of a socialist and internationalist movement to transfer state power to the working class.

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