

The mass protests in France: A new stage in the international class struggle

3 December 2018

On Saturday, 100,000 people took part in a series of mass “yellow vest” demonstrations throughout France against President Emmanuel Macron’s anti-worker fuel tax hike, in the most significant mass protests in the country since the May-June 1968 general strike.

These events are a critical turning point not just for France or even Europe, but internationally. The eruption of social protest marks a renewal of class struggle. Enormous social contradictions have accumulated over the nearly three decades since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and particularly over the decade since the crash of 2008. All the rottenness of bourgeois society—the staggering level of social inequality, the endless accumulation of wealth within a small percentage of the population, the ever-greater levels of poverty and suffering—are erupting to the surface.

In Macron, the ruling elite has its true representative—a hated and farcical figure, the investment banker turned president, who is nothing more than the puppet of the European stock exchanges. In the face of anger and outrage, Macron has made clear that he intends to go ahead with his anti-working-class policies, if need be through police-state means and the declaration of a state of emergency. The moment the masses challenge the economic demands of the ruling elite, it turns to violence and repression.

What is driving developments in France are not essentially national, but global conditions. What Macron can do, how he can respond, is determined by the demands of international capital. He is carrying out his attack on workers in France as the American bourgeoisie is implementing a new round of cost-cutting, epitomized in the mass layoffs announced at General Motors. Amid growing signs of a renewed economic slump, the ruling elite is going on the

offensive in every country.

On the other side is the working class, which is showing itself to be not just an oppressed class, but a revolutionary class. Beneath the surface of bourgeois order and stability a civil war is brewing.

All the reactionary nostrums of the middle-class pseudo-left, that social inequality is not the central issue in contemporary society, and that the proletariat is not a revolutionary class, are being blown to pieces. Their obsessive fixation on issues of gender, race and sexuality are proving to be not only irrelevant; their only purpose will be to disorient and poison the developing working-class movement.

As for the claims of the “end of history,” advanced following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, these have proven mere fantasy. Only a year ago, amid the centenary of the Russian Revolution, the ideologists of capitalism were proclaiming that the October Revolution has no relevance to the modern world. Yet now, a revolutionary situation is beginning to emerge.

As the WSWS anticipated, the distinctive feature of the past year has been the upsurge of class struggle. The year began with mass protests in Iran and strikes by industrial workers in Germany, lecturers in the UK and teachers in the United States. The year has seen significant expressions of social opposition in Latin America, the Middle East and Asia.

The year is coming to an end amid the mass protests in France, growing unrest among autoworkers in the US and mass strikes in South Korea, Greece and Chile. To this must be added the protests of migrant workers, including the migrant workers from Central America confronting the armed forces of the United States at the US-Mexico border.

The experiences of the past year—and France is no exception—have demonstrated the incapacity to implement any change in the interests of the broad

mass of the population within the framework of the existing political institutions and the trade unions. The entire structure of the political system, right and “left,” is completely removed from and hostile to the concerns of the working class.

In France, once again, opposition has emerged completely outside of the framework of the trade unions, closely integrated into the state, whose initial response to the demonstrations was to denounce them. There is a bloc of reaction that extends from the Élysée Palace to the offices of middle-class parties like the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA). All are concerned with one thing: How can they bring this movement under control and stop it.

The central question that now emerges is that of perspective and strategy. There is an urgent need to deepen the struggle, bringing into it the broadest sections of the working class and youth. This requires the formation of committees of action, independent organizations of working-class struggle, which, as Trotsky wrote in 1935, one year before the 1936 French general strike, are “the only means of breaking the antirevolutionary opposition of the party and trade union apparatuses.” Such organizations will “have as their task to unite the toiling masses of France in a defensive struggle and thus imbue these masses with the consciousness of their own power for the coming offensive.”

The development of new organizations of working-class struggle is bound up with the most critical question of all, that of the development of a political movement based on the strategy of world socialist revolution.

The growth of the class struggle on an international scale is bound up with the nature of the global capitalist system itself. Again, what is developing in France is not just a manifestation of French conditions, but of global conditions. It is, in its own way, telling that these demonstrations erupted just as Macron was returning from the G20, a global gathering of the leaders of the most powerful bourgeois states to hammer out their plans to exploit and oppress the world’s workers and prepare for global war.

The development of world capitalism, Trotsky wrote in 1907, “has transformed the entire world into a single economic and political organism...

[T]he entire economic and political functioning of capitalism, with its world trade, its system of monstrous state debts and international political alliances, which are drawing all the reactionary forces into a single worldwide joint-stock company, has not only resisted all partial political crises but has also prepared the conditions for a social crisis of unprecedented dimensions.

These words hold true today in every country. Workers all over the world identify with the demands of the French workers. All over the world, the ruling elite is restructuring social life in the interests of capital, to ensure not only the diversion of social wealth into their own pockets, but to provide the funding for the next series of wars.

The response of the bourgeoisie to these events will be to enormously accelerate their preparations for war and repression, including the building up of neo-fascistic forces. The ruling elite has many weapons at its disposal. However, the workers have an even greater weapon: the billions-strong global working class, the greatest revolutionary force in human history.

The central task facing workers in France and around the world is the building of the World Party of Socialist Revolution, the International Committee of the Fourth International, including its national section, the *Parti de l'égalité socialiste*. On this the trajectory of development in France and around the world will be determined.

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