

German Left Party denounces “Yellow Vest” protests

By Peter Schwarz
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The “Yellow Vests” who have taken to the streets in France for the past three weeks to protest against the “president of the rich”, Emmanuel Macron, have caused panic not only in the Paris government, but also in the Berlin headquarters of Germany’s Left Party.

Abhorrence of any revolt from below is written into the DNA of the Left Party, which emerged from a fusion of the Stalinist state party of former East Germany with a group of Social Democrats and trade union bureaucrats from the West. To paraphrase Friedrich Engels, it is “more frightened of the least popular movement than of all the reactionary plots of all the Governments put together”. The Left Party instinctively regards any social movement that is not controlled and held in check by the trade unions as a right-wing conspiracy.

A week ago, the WSWS pointed out that the Left Party’s house organ, *Neues Deutschland* (ND), reacted with open hostility to the protests in France. Now the co-chair of the party, Bernd Riexinger, has spoken out to denounce the Yellow Vests. “The potential of ultra-rightists in the ranks of the movement is worrying”, he said. In Germany “such fraternisation of left and right-wing sentiments is unthinkable”.

ND gave prominence to Riexinger’s derogatory remarks in its online edition and supplemented them with an interview with a French trade unionist who warns that the street protests are a “dangerous development”.

“I refuse to take part because the Yellow Vests are strongly supported from the right”, ND cites Michel Poittevin, an official of the Solidaires-SUD union. Above all, Poittevin is outraged that the unions, which have a long record of isolating, breaking, and selling out every social movement, have no influence over the Yellow Vests. It was “a movement that we as left trade

unionists cannot fathom. People have organised themselves, who are not or only tangentially in a union, or who even do not want to join one”, he laments.

Poittevin compares the protests against Macron with the Italian Five-Star Movement and the French Poujadists, a far-right party that achieved temporary electoral successes in the 1950s and in which the National Front’s founder, Jean-Marie Le Pen, was active.

This is nothing less than a vicious slander. The Yellow Vests movement is directed against the decades-long redistribution of income and wealth from the poor to the rich, which has made life impossible for many working-class families. It is part of an international working-class offensive that manifests itself in a growing number of strikes and protests. The increase in the gasoline tax by the former investment banker Macron, who had previously lowered taxes for the rich, was simply the last straw.

Even many bourgeois media outlets opposed to the movement must admit to this fact. The December 4 editorial in the daily *Le Monde* states that the inability of successive governments to respond to the global financial crisis of 2008 has “fuelled anger on the most powerful of breeding grounds, the sense of inequality”.

The striving for social equality has revolutionary implications. It can only be realised through the overthrow of capitalism and requires an international, socialist movement of the working class. This is diametrically opposed to the goals of the extreme right, which fuel nationalism, divide the working class, and are preparing to defend capitalism with brutal force.

If extreme right-wingers seek to influence the movement and are partly able to do so, then it is only because they can exploit the anger and frustration of broad layers with those alleged “leftists” who have

been and remain at the forefront of the attacks on the working class. This applies not only to the French Socialists and the German SPD, but also to the Left Party, which is pressing ahead with austerity policies in Berlin and other federal states where the party is part of or heads the administration.

Riexinger's denunciation of the Yellow Vests plays into the hands of the extreme right. What worries him is not "the potential of ultra-rightists in the ranks of the movement", but rather its revolutionary potential and the fact that it is developing outside of the straitjacket of the unions and established parties. Before taking up the leadership of the Left Party, Riexinger was a full-time Verdi (public service union) secretary in Stuttgart and is familiar with these issues.

The Left Party can accommodate and even ally itself with the far-right—as its idol Alexis Tsipras did in Greece, where he implemented a reckless austerity program in a coalition with the far-right Independent Greeks. But the Left Party cannot accommodate and ally itself with a movement that threatens the capitalist order.

In contrast to Riexinger, the head of the Left Party faction in the Bundestag, Sahra Wagenknecht, expressed support for the Yellow Vests. "I think it's right for people to defend themselves and protest when politics makes their lives worse", she said. She hoped for "stronger protests in Germany against a government that cares more about the interests of business lobbyists than the interests of ordinary people".

In fact, the differences between Riexinger and Wagenknecht are purely tactical. While Riexinger denounces the Yellow Vests, Wagenknecht believes it is necessary to influence the movement in order to prevent it from developing in a socialist direction.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon, with whom Wagenknecht and her husband Oskar Lafontaine work closely, is very explicit in this regard. In a recent blog post, the leader of La France Insoumise wrote that he is "jubilant" about current events, which he describes as a "people's revolution" (*révolution citoyenne*). According to Mélenchon, the movement confirms that the concepts of the proletariat and the socialist revolution no longer play a central role in historical dynamics.

In fact, it is Mélenchon who wants to prevent the movement from assuming a more proletarian character and moving towards socialist revolution. He insists that

it remain "peaceful and democratic" and that it must be resolved in the framework of the existing institutions. In other words, he wants a "people's revolution" that does not affect capitalist property relations and the institutions of the bourgeois state.

The Parti de l'égalité socialiste (PES), the French section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, is the only political tendency that fights to expand the struggle against Macron, to mobilise support in the French and international working class and set up action committees independent of the unions to direct and organise the struggle.

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