

# Which way forward for France's "yellow vest" protests?

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With the fourth Saturday of "yellow vest" protests against President Emmanuel Macron, a mass movement is clearly emerging among workers against the capitalist system. Macron's withdrawal of the regressive fuel tax hike that initially triggered the protest resolved nothing. Among the "yellow vests," demands for social equality, large wage increases, Macron's ouster, eliminating the privileges of the super rich, an end to militarism, and for general strikes and a revolution are coming to the fore.

Claims that the Stalinist bureaucracy's dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked the end of the class struggle, the final triumph of capitalist democracy, or the End of History have been blown to pieces. As "yellow vest" protests spread from France to Belgium and the Netherlands, Bulgaria, and as far as Iraq—where workers in Basra donned yellow vests to protest NATO's neocolonial regime—the international working class is emerging in struggle against the diktat of the banks.

Saturday's massive crackdown was a searing lesson in the character of bourgeois democracy: as soon as there is any expression of genuine popular opposition, the guns come out. After riot police backed with military armored vehicles and water cannon kettled and assaulted peaceful protesters starting early in the day, violent clashes erupted in all France's largest cities. A record 1,385 people were arrested.

The "yellow vest" protests are now at a critical stage. The movement has provoked a confrontation not just with the president of the rich, but the entire regime of the rich. Most leading figures in the "yellow vest" movement continue to turn down offers of talks from the political establishment: Macron's token concessions, binding arbitration by the union bureaucracies, or proposals of an alliance from Jean-Luc Mélenchon's Unsubmissive France party.

The demonstrators also remain overwhelmingly popular.

The danger, however, is that without a clear political perspective and orientation for a broader struggle against Macron, the movement can be frittered away in fruitless protest actions, or subordinated to the maneuvers of the ruling elite.

The question of political leadership is central. It is significant that some "yellow vest" groups like that in Commercy are calling for building popular committees to decide upon and coordinate the activities of the movement. What is developing, in a highly embryonic form, is dual power. Against the bankers' government, protected by its hordes of riot police, the specter of separate and opposed institutions, representing and organizing the workers in struggle, is beginning to emerge.

These events underscore the contemporary significance of Leon Trotsky's call to form committees of action, just before the 1936 French general strike. Such bodies can unify strike struggles and protests by different sections of workers and youth, keep them from being isolated and sold out by the union bureaucracies, and provide a rallying point for the vast opposition among broader masses of workers. This provides a basis for mobilizing the deep opposition within the working class to the austerity drive by Macron and the European Union.

Trotsky stressed that for workers, such committees were the "only means of breaking the anti-revolutionary opposition of the trade union and party apparatus." This is critical today, as workers run straight into the vicious hostility of the unions and allied political parties of the affluent middle class. These forces are desperate to preserve their privileges, by blocking an independent struggle of the working class against Macron and his government of the rich.

Not a single established political tendency in France has responded to the “yellow vest” movement, which objectively raises the issue of a challenge to the capitalist system, in a progressive manner. Daniel Cohn-Bendit, the middle-class student leader in May 1968, shamelessly slandered it as fascistic, telling Germany’s *taz* newspaper that “the large majority of the yellow vest movement comes from the National Front, from the reservoir of the extreme right.”

Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT) union leader Philippe Martinez insinuated the same thing, darkly hinting that the “yellow vests” are “people we can’t be seen with.” Now, after calling off a truckers’ strike, the CGT is calling a symbolic, one-day rail strike on December 14.

The middle-class New Anticapitalist Party (NPA) aims to use this cynical maneuver to drive the “yellow vests” into the grip of the unions. It called on “yellow vests” to ask Martinez to let them join a general strike controlled by the CGT: “Combative unions and yellow vests should ask or even impose this perspective on the national union leaderships, starting with a real general strike call for the ‘yellow vest’ protest on December 14.”

Under cover of such maneuvers, the ruling class hopes to subordinate the protesters to the unions and the state machine. “The entire political system is shaken,” the *Journal du dimanche* wrote, but Saturday’s police repression “has given the government maneuvering room, a breath of fresh air.” It hailed the fact that Prime Minister Edouard Philippe concluded his brief speech on Saturday night by saying: “And now for dialog!”

The “yellow vest” protesters are fully justified in their mistrust of all those who try to tie them to fruitless, reactionary deals with Macron. There is nothing to negotiate with Macron, the ruthless representative of the banks; begging the capitalist politicians sitting in the National Assembly to serve the people will likewise bring only disappointment.

The critical task is a political struggle against the Macron government and the power of the banks. In this era of globalized capitalism and international finance, trade and supply chains, this signifies an international struggle on the basis of a genuine socialist program: to expropriate the obscene fortunes of the financial aristocracy, and place the resources of world economy

under the democratic control of working people.

This program flows from the objective tasks posed by the upsurge of the class struggle: across Europe, the mounting social anger and strike activity in every country tends towards the eruption of a general strike.

The task of organizing a general strike against the European Union, Macron and similar governments across Europe cannot be left to the unions, who are hostile to the movement and will not carry it out. The way forward is the formation of committees of action that can prepare and lay the basis in the working class for a real general strike, in France and across Europe, carried out in opposition to the maneuvers of the unions and the pseudo-left parties.

The role of the *Parti de l’égalité socialiste* (PES) and the other European sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International in this movement will be to argue for the necessity of transferring power to the independent political organizations created by the workers. The PES encourages the widest possible discussion of this perspective in factories, workplaces, universities and schools across France and Europe.

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