

French Government Responds to Mass Protests

Weekends of demonstrations over economic issues proves disastrous for Macron regime

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Saturday December 15 marked the fifth consecutive week where thousands of people have held marches and engaged in various forms of civil disobedience throughout France.

Sparked by the imposition of a fuel tax, the “gilet jaunes” (Yellow Vest) movement has exposed the negative impact of the neo-liberal policies of the ruling La Republique en Marche **President Emmanuel Macron**. Even after the president announced the suspension and eventual elimination of the fuel tax along with other reforms related to minimum wages and pensions, demonstrations still took place the following week albeit in smaller numbers.

The rationale for the fuel tax imposed by Macron was ostensibly to reduce the usage of fossil fuels. This supposed “green energy policy” which includes the reduction in the speed limit disproportionately affects motorists who live outside the central metropolitan areas.

In Strasbourg on the border with Germany and the official seat of the European Parliament, an attack at the Christmas market area on December 11 resulting in the deaths of five people prompted a broadened security presence by the French authorities. International media coverage shifted from the plight of workers and the middle income sectors, to the ongoing “anti-terrorism” narrative.

However, this incident in Strasbourg did not halt the burgeoning consciousness of people surrounding the policies of the Macron administration which is deliberately designed to disempower trade unions and further impoverish large sections of the population. The Yellow Vest movement was conveniently projected as people are required to carry this apparel in their vehicles to indicate emergencies on the streets and railways.

Since the beginning of the demonstrations seven people have been killed. The French government has deployed nearly 70,000 riot police to control the protests. Police agencies have reported tremendous stress among its personnel attempting to quell the unrest and called for their own picket lines outside law-enforcement offices on December 19.

Two days after the fifth straight week of Saturday demonstrations, protesters targeted toll stations to illustrate the rising cost of personal transportation in France. Many of the participants taking part in the demonstrations are those located in the outskirts of major cities threatened with financial ruin due to the policies of the current government.

Protest actions were reported on December 18 at 40 different toll collection outlets. Several locations were set on fire.

These toll station seizures and arsons are complicating security concerns on the highways where the largest firm which administers the outlets, Vinci Autoroutes, issued a warning to drivers traveling on the highways. There were attacks on intersections near tourist towns such as Avignon, Orange, Perpignan, Agde, etc.

Early on December 18, the Bandol toll was firebombed prompting the closing of A50 Highway between Marseille and Toulon. In addition, the Manosque toll station was burned as well.

Vinci Autoroutes is heavily centered in the western and southern regions of France. The increasing attacks on highway locations are damaging the flow of traffic during the holiday season. It was announced by the French authorities that 20 people were arrested on December 18 in connection with the attacks on the toll stations.

Speed radar monitors have been hit as well over the last few weeks. The disabling of these machines mean that traffic citations for speeding cannot be documented depriving the company and the French government of millions in revenues.

Radars-auto.com reported that 1600 traffic monitoring devices have been destroyed by demonstrators. This number accounts for approximately 50% of all such machines in the entire country.

These radar machines yielded 84 million euros (US\$96 million) every month during 2017. French Interior Ministry officials refused to provide a specific number of how many radar devices have been taken out in the last few weeks. The state did however note that the cost of repairing the radar monitoring devices could run from 500 to 200,000 euros.



France yellow vest demonstrations during Nov.-Dec. 2018

Conditions Which Sparked Unrest

The developments in France surrounding the Yellow Vest protests are a direct byproduct of the declining standard of living among workers, the poor and disaffected people in the

middle classes. The two major political parties which contested in the 2017 runoff elections were the newly-created La République en Marche composed of former Socialist Party leaders and conservative elements both of whom are committed to a neo-liberal economic agenda which favors the interests of finance capital far above and beyond the working class and poor, and the National Front, headed by Marine Le Pen, a neo-fascist pro-capitalist party which takes a hardline against immigration from the Middle East, Africa and Eastern Europe.

Objectively many people in France are suffering from increasing marginalization. This is exemplified by the consistently high jobless rates over the last two decades.

According to a report published by tradingeconomics.com,

“The unemployment rate in France stood at 9.1% in the third quarter of 2018, the same as in the previous period and slightly below market expectations of 9.2%. In metropolitan France only, the unemployment rate was also unchanged at 8.8% in the third quarter as the number of unemployed increased by 22,000 to 2.6 million. The employment rate rose by 0.1% points to 65.9%, its highest level since the early 1980s, and the activity rate moved up to 72.3%, its highest since the series began in 1975. Unemployment rates in France averaged 9.27% from 1996 until 2018, reaching an all-time high of 10.70% in the first quarter of 1997 and a record low of 7.20% in the first quarter of 2008.”

Demands put forward by the Yellow Vest movement has extended beyond economic issues such as toll rates, fuel prices, minimum wages and the high rates of taxation on salaries and pensions. Many within the demonstrations have called for the resignation of Macron and even the overthrow of the Fifth Republic.

Right-wing elements have entered the demonstrations believing that the collapse of the Macron presidency could pave the way for the ascendancy of Le Pen. Yet there is a diversity of political and class interests involved in the protests. Absent of a clearly identifiable national political leadership the movement could potentially be a stage for the ideological struggle which is needed for France to move forward beyond the present neo-liberal impasse.

The left-wing Confederation of Trade Unions (CGT) had called for a strike over energy policy on November 27. Other radical and anarchist elements are seeking to influence the character of the protests as well.

Bruno Drweski, a historian and geo-political analyst working at the National Institute for Eastern Languages and Cultures (INALCO) in Paris, granted an interview to LeftEast online journal where Maria Cernat, a lecturer at the Communications Sciences and International Relations Department of Titu Maiorescu University in Bucharest, Romania, asked several questions about the social character of the Yellow Vest protest movement.

The observations of Drweski emphasize that:

“People are strongly determined not to capitulate, but the main problem is the lack of organization, which on one side makes the movement broader but, on the other leaves it open to provocations, manipulations and social divisions. Even if the general mood is marked with values and slogans that were first used during the French Revolution, it is hard to say if this ‘national-political-

social unity' will prevail so as to force the government to retreat on policies that are pursued not only by the government but also by the EU and the international financial organizations within the frame of the capitalist globalization process."

International Significance of the French Movement

Throughout the entire European Union (EU) a similar economic and political crisis to what exist in France prevails. Demonstrations have erupted in other countries such as Belgium and the Netherlands.

In Brussels the demonstrations have taken on a decisively right-wing character where on December 15 crowds of people demanded the government of **Prime Minister Charles Michel** resign over the signing of the United Nations Global Compact on Migration at a conference in Morocco. The aims of the agreement are to develop a comprehensive approach to migration policy internationally.

Ten countries including many former socialist states in Eastern Europe have withdrawn their support for the migration pact. Earlier in July when the Morocco conference was held the United States refused to sign the UN document.

Michel offered to step down presenting his resignation letter to **King Philippe** on December 18 after a vote of no-confidence in parliament where other parties in the ruling coalition and the opposition refused to back his continuing rule. Right-wing elements in Belgium view the migration pact as encouraging the entry of people from the Middle East, Africa and Asia.

These political developments which are influenced by the economic crisis gripping the western capitalist states could result in both rightward and leftward tilts in the character of the responses by the working and middle classes. Nonetheless, the adoption of a purported "populist" stance on the failure of the neo-liberal governance model provides no solution to the majority of working and oppressed peoples within the capitalist countries.

Western industrialized nations are experiencing limited growth rates with a widening gap between the rich and poor. Attacks on migrants and the nationally oppressed cannot guarantee higher wages and better living conditions for the previously more stable working and middle classes.

Imperialist wars in the last three decades in Iraq, the Balkans, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Yemen and other geo-political regions have drained the national wealth of the western countries. The global recession after 2007 and the large-scale governmental bailouts of the international financial institutions along with the industrialists have further weakened the social fabric of world capitalist system.

Only a movement to genuinely empower the workers and oppressed on a non-capitalist basis provides the potential for moving beyond the present crisis in Europe, North America and the rest of the world.

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