

Yellow Vest Protest Movement: Inequality and the Hollowness of the French Regime

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Ignored by French President Emmanuel Macron, distorted by the media, courted by the Right, snubbed by the Left, the self-organized mass movement known as the [Yellow Vests](#) (Mouvement des gilets jaunes) is seriously challenging the political and economic order in France.

In Paris, on the morning of Saturday December 1st, as thousands of self-organized Yellow Vest protestors attempted to gather to express their grievances on the Champs-Élysées at a planned, peaceful demonstration, French CRS riot police in Paris attacked them savagely with tear-gas, flash-bombs and water-cannons. By the end of the day, cars were burning near the Arc de Triomphe, and all of Paris was in chaos as groups of would-be peaceful marchers, joined by the usual *casseurs* (smashers) spread throughout the capital, expressing their anger at the system and calling for the resignation of President Macron.

This militarized state over-reaction to a peaceful mass demonstration breaks with a long tradition of tolerance for muscled demonstrations by rowdy angry farmers and militant labour unions. A tolerance Macron, in speeches, has blamed for the failure of previous governments to pass needed pro-business counter-reforms. Predictably, Macron (who must have ordered Saturday morning's unprovoked, violent attacks on unarmed demonstrators arriving early for the planned march) blamed the victims:

“What happened today in Paris has nothing to do with the peaceful expression of legitimate anger,” [he said on Saturday](#). “Nothing justifies attacking the security forces, vandalizing businesses, either private or public ones, or that passers-by or journalists are threatened, or the Arc de Triomphe defaced.”

Meanwhile, throughout the French provinces, at least 75,000 Yellow Vest protesters (police estimate) were blocking highway entrances, intersections, and shopping centers all day – all with minimal violence and apparent general approval (80% according to recent polls).

Why France's 'Silent Majority' Is Mad as Hell

Like all the spontaneous mass uprisings that dot French history going back to Feudal times, the Yellow Vest revolt was initially provoked by taxes. In this case, the straw that broke the camel's back was Macron's decision to increase taxes on gas and diesel fuel, which affect ordinary working and lower-middle class French people dependent on their cars to earn a living. The rebels, donning the yellow breakdown-safety vests they are required to keep in their cars by the government, have been on the warpath for three weeks now. Spurning all political parties, the Yellow Vests got organized on social media and acted locally. The

broadcast media, although highly critical, spread the news nationally, and the Yellow Vest movement spread across France, blocking intersections, filtering motorists, and gathering to demonstrate, more and more numerous and militant, on successive Saturdays.

Why Saturdays?: "I can't go on strike," explains one woman. "I'm raising three kids alone. My job, that's all I have left. Coming on Saturdays is the only way for me to show my anger." Women workers – receptionists, hostesses, nurses-aids, teachers – are present in unusually large numbers in these crowds, and they are angry about a lot more than the tax on diesel.

To begin with, inequality: Like U.S. President Donald Trump, Emmanuel Macron has showered corporations and millionaires with huge tax cuts, creating a hole in the budget which he has compensated by cuts in public services (hospitals, schools, transit, police) and by tax increases for ordinary people (up to 40% of their income), large numbers of whom are struggling hard to make ends meet and going into debt. "We're hungry and we're fed up," [said Jessica Monnier](#), 28, who works in a watch factory in the French Alps. She earns €970 a month, and said: "Once I pay my bills, I don't have enough to eat. We're just hungry, that's all."

This anger has been building since last Spring, the 50th anniversary of the [1968 worker-student uprising](#), but was frustrated when Macron won the stand-off with labour over his neoliberal, pro-business counter-reforms. This labour defeat was facilitated by the leadership of the Confédération générale du travail (CGT) and other unions, played the same negative role in the 1968 sell-out to Charles de Gaulle. A half-century later the French union leaders, eager to keep their place at the political table (and on the government payroll), avoided a major confrontation, met with the government behind the scenes, and only went through the motions of carrying out strikes, spreading them over months and tiring out the workers [see my "[French Labour's Historical Defeat](#)"].

Macron is also hated for his truly monarchical arrogance, ruling alone like Louis XIV, imposing his will by decrees, ignoring his opponents and patronizing the common people in a pedantic style that humiliates and enrages them. By dismissing the Yellow Vests, haughtily refusing to address their issues, and then violently repressing them despite their popularity, Macron has revealed the vast gap between his authoritarian, neoliberal regime and the mass of the French population. The French [elected him in 2017](#), in the run-off following the first round collapse of the traditional parties of the Left and the Right. Macron was a stop-gap to prevent the election of Marine Le Pen of the extreme-right, openly racist National Front. He has no real mandate and no political party behind him, despite an unorganized parliamentary majority.

This Saturday, the demonstrators were heard booing the TV network people on Place de la Concorde, furious at being been presented as deliberate vandals, calling the press "Usurpers." "We wanted to come and demonstrate calmly," said one fifty-ish Yellow Vest [interviewed by Médiapart](#). "I came by train, I had my ID card in my pocket. They threw so much tear-gas at us that we ran like rabbits." He then held out a rubber cartridge. "They even fired Flash-balls at us" he added as two nearby women nodded. "Who are the Vandals?"

Another would-be demonstrator, Franck, from nearby Seine-et-Marne, added: "We came to the Champs-Élysées this morning and when we tried to approach the entry-points, we were immediately inundated with tear-gas, 300 meters *before* the check-points." Furious, he spits out "Macron gasses his own people like Bashar al-Assad!"

Marité, a retiree from the suburbs, kept repeating over and over: “I confess before the CGT that I voted for Macron, and beg your forgiveness.” She has worked for 42 years, her husband for 44; together their retirement comes to \$3,200 a month and their anger is deep. A woman named Morgane hisses through clenched teeth a phrase heard all over France since the beginning of the movement: “Marie-Antoinette was living high off the hog just before the Revolution also. And they cut off her head.”¹

What was remarkable at this Saturday’s chaotic mass outbreak in the streets of Paris was the fortuitous convergence of the Yellow Vests with previously scheduled demonstrations organized by the CGT and other unions as well as the feminist [#MoiAussi](#) (#MeToo) movement, and the LGBT movement. So happenstance created the first real dialogue between members of these disparate movements which took place under clouds of tear-gas as the various demonstrators, driven away from the Champs-Élysées area by the police, wandered through the half-empty streets.

A start: Angry French people waited all Spring for the promised “convergence” of the various unions of students and workers united against Macron’s reactionary anti-reforms which the leaders never organized, leaving the different groups of strikers isolated.

Popular Risings, Elite Contempt

The French popular classes have long historical memories, and seem unaffected by the postmodern scholarly denigration of the 1789 French Revolution and its successors as useless explosions of popular violence which inevitably led to bloody dictatorships. Morgane knows all she needs to know about the guillotine. According to [Gérard Noiriel](#), author of a monumental history of France ‘from below,’ “The Yellow Vests who block highways and refuse to be coopted by political parties have taken up, in confused form, the tradition of the *Sans-culottes* of 1792-93, the citizen-combatants of February 1848, the Communards of 1870-71 and the anarcho-syndicalists of the Banquet Years.”

Indeed, these traditions go back much earlier, to the Feudal period, with its periodic uprisings of peasants burning landlord’s chateaux and urban rioters taking over towns. What changed in late 18th Century France was the development of roads and mail service, that enabled revolutionary Committees of Correspondence to coordinate and organize discontent on a national level. Today, Internet social networks and network news play the same role in real time.

Like today’s Yellow Vest rebellion, all these historical uprisings were initially about excessive unfair taxes, like the *Tithe* of 10% (imposed by the wealthy Catholic Church on the poor), the royal *Gabelle* tax on salt (necessary for life and preserving foodstuffs) and the *Corvée* (days of free labour owed to the noble landlord, the Church and the government). Although violent, these spontaneous, self-organized risings eventually led to the democratic republic, the [Rights of Man and of the Citizen](#), free secular education, etc. (all under threat today).

The other common denominator between the Yellow Vests and historical popular movements is the near-universal contempt with which they were (are) treated by France’s elite classes: the royalty, the nobility, the upper clergy, official academic historians, and today the media and the leadership of the unions and Left parties, who have joined the establishment and are an integral part of what the French call the “political class.”

Class Prejudice

Not so much has changed since the Old Regime. Then, the nobles derisively referred to any peasant as “Jacques Bonhomme” (Jack Goodfellow), and to their violent uprisings as “Jacqueries.” Around 1360 the revered French chronicler Jean Froissart reported: “These evil folk assembled together without a leader and without arms were stealing and burning everything and killing without pity and without merci, like rabid dogs. And they made a king among them who was the worst of the bad; and this king they called Jacques Bonhomme.”

In fact, says Noiriél, the archives show the peasants selected as their spokesman one Guillaume Carle, known to be “a good thinker and a good talker.”

Similarly, for three weeks the government, the media, and even the Left (parties and unions) have been attempting to present the Yellow Vests as red-necks and/or vandals, while reducing their generalized anger to the issue of gas taxes. On one TV broadcast, the reporter kept trying to get the Yellow Vest being interviewed to say she was rebelling against taxes, but the woman kept repeating over and over: “Fed up to the ass-hole,” “We’ve had it up to the ass,” “Everything.”²

The organized Left has shown little sympathy for this, self-organized, autonomous (albeit amorphous) uprising of desperate and angry lower middle class people who, out of long experience, reject domination by union and party leaders. Plus, they live in places no one has heard of and sing the [Marseillaise](#) (originally a revolutionary song, but who remembers). More, the color “Yellow” used to stand for “scab unions.” So the unions and Left parties, as usual embroiled in infighting among each other, instead of supporting the Yellow Vests’ struggle against Macron and offering leadership by example, left the field open to the Right. Le Pen’s people (also embroiled in internal squabbles) attempted to manipulate the movement and made little headway, as did belatedly Jean-Luc Mélenchon.

France in Crisis?

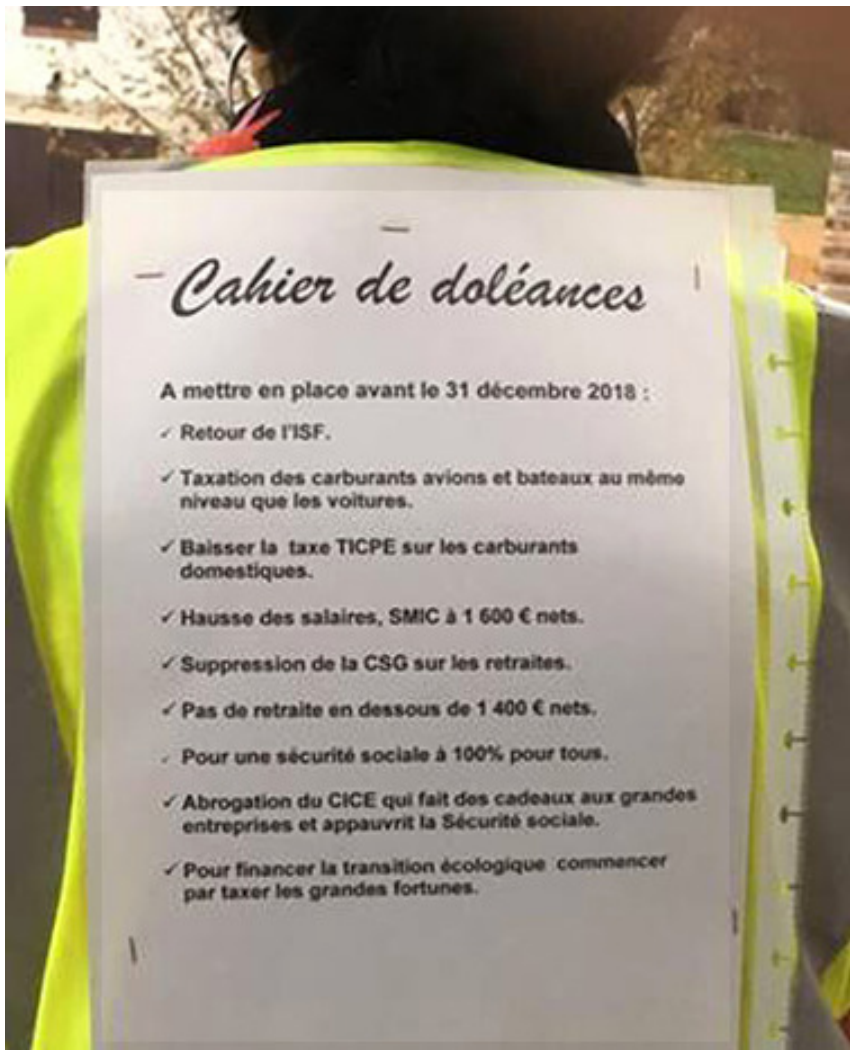
Hegemonic Balance Sheet:

An autocratic President without a party or a mandate. Crowds calling for him to resign. A desperate lower class population angry over growing economic inequality in a rich country and government indifference to their plight. A class of organized civil servants and unionized workers still licking their wounds and paying their bills after failing to block the President’s counter-reforms last Spring.

Traditional parties – Left (Socialists, etc.) and Right (Gaullists etc.) – that have alternated in power since the end of WWII diminished and eclipsed. The parties of the far Left (Mélenchon, various Trotskyists, etc.) and the far Right (the former National Front) are too preoccupied with internal fights to play any significant role.

Powerful, effective mass media dominated by the interests of big business but viewed with suspicion by more and more of the population.

A brand-new “leaderless” spontaneous mass movement connected by social media, “finding its way by walking,” more or less consciously embedded in a long history of rebellions and struggle, finding its natural leaders (“good thinkers, good talkers” like old Guillaume Carle), putting forth its own ideas for the reorganization of society.



Here are the two latest proposals coming from the Yellow Vests and borrowed from the history the 18th Century French revolution. First, a call for a kind of democratic constituent assembly. Second, the creation of *Cahiers de doléances* (Grievance Notebooks) like the ones in 1788 listing all the people's complaints and proposed remedies. Both great ideas. We can only hope that given the hollowness of the hegemony of the French political class, the convenience of social media for self-organization, and the desperate desire for dignity and participatory democracy incarnated in this latest historical uprising, something good may come of it.

Meanwhile, here are excerpts from the 2018 Yellow Vest Grievance list³:

- No one left homeless.
- End the austerity policy. Cancel the interest on illegitimate debt. Don't tax the poor to pay it back, find the €85-billion of fiscal fraud uncollected.
- Create a true integration policy, with French language, history and civics courses for immigrants.
- Minimum salary €1500 per month.
- Privilege city and village centers. Stop building huge shopping centers.
- More progressive income tax rates.
- Big companies like McDonald's, Google, Amazon and Carrefour should pay big taxes, and little artisans low taxes. •

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Richard Greeman has been active since 1957 in civil rights, anti-war, anti-nuke, environmental and labour struggles in the U.S., Latin America, France (where he has been a longtime resident) and Russia (where he helped found the Praxis Research and Education Center in 1997). He maintains a blog at richardgreeman.org.

Notes

1. Quotations translated from [Les «gilets jaunes» débordent dans les rues de Paris](#).
2. «on en a ras le cul», «ras le cul», «ras le bol généralisé” BFM-TV, Nov.17, reported in [Les gilets jaunes et les «lecons de l’histoire»](#).
3. [Great long list](#).

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