

French Yellow Vests - Gilets Jaunes: a popular movement of a new kind

Sunday 17 February 2019, by [LE MOAL Patrick](#), [POUPIN Christine](#) (Date first published: 20 December 2018).

The steamroller of the Macron “start-up” seemed to be advancing relentlessly. The Gilets Jaunes (“Yellow Vests”) movement has thrown his government into crisis, the popular anger has been such that it has been forced to draw back, at least symbolically. It is the first time since 2006, when the massive mobilisation of youth supported by several days of strike action called by the trade unions forced the withdrawal of the Contrat Première Embauche, that a French government has faced a crisis which it can only resolve by abandoning its project. [1]

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Nonetheless, since the neoliberal turn of the 1980s, social struggles have multiplied in France. But these successive struggles, strike actions and mass demonstrations have only at best been able to limit the breadth of the destruction of the social conquests of the previous period and have not prevented a long series of defeats and social setbacks which have continued in recent months with the employment law which has unravelled a part of the Employment Code, the privatisation of the SNCF and the destruction of the status of rail workers.

There months ago, we sought in vain to break this spiral and defeat the new pensions counter-reform planned by Macron for 2019. Today the breadth and the radical determination of the Gilets Jaunes movement, a social movement which is impetuous, inventive and uncontrollable, has modified the relationship of forces, perceptibly transforming the social and political situation in France.

Whatever happens next, it has already destabilised the Macron government, at least temporarily halting its crazed race towards counter reforms. It seems that some reforms will be indefinitely postponed in the areas of pensions, health and the civil service.

An enduring movement

For more than 2 months this movement has endured, respecting neither the end of year truce nor the national union following the attack on the Christmas market in Strasbourg in December. 2018

The movement began with the signature of a petition which spread like wildfire on the social networks. It thus developed outside of any political or trade union framework. In November the blockades of roundabouts on highways began. Crossroads just outside of towns were targeted to disturb economic functioning and hinder lorry traffic. Some hundreds of thousands of Gilets Jaunes (at least 300,000) participated in around 2,500 blockades.

From Saturday November 17, 2018, unauthorised demonstrations which were not coordinated with the police brought hundreds of thousands of participants out every week. In Paris, in the wealthy neighbourhoods, the offices of government ministries, the sites of power which the demonstrations of the workers' movement don't go to and in the city centres. The police repression against these demonstrations has been growing. On December 1, 2018 the symbolic Arc de Triomphe was tagged and defaced during very violent confrontations, in Puy-en-Velay the prefecture was set on fire and the airports in Nice and Nantes were blockaded. On December 8, the government wanted to send a message, mobilising 85,000 police officers with a military arsenal and tanks, and making more than 2,000 "preventive" arrests without stopping the demonstrations in the streets of Paris and most of the big cities.

Since this date, repression has prevented the Gilets Jaunes from demonstrating en masse in Paris, but not in the rest of the country. Even if the number of demonstrators has fallen since mid-December, it has remained at a very high level every Saturday. The movement is still present and mobilising tens of thousands of very determined people. Yet the government has done everything to break the mobilisation, with an unprecedented police and legal repression, while conceding a little and opening a simulation of debate to seek to isolate the Gilets Jaunes politically from the rest of the population.

After the demonstration of December 1, it announced the cancellation of the fuel tax increase which had been at the origin of the protest, but it was too little too late. After the demonstration of December 8, it made announcements according to the general principle of "I am giving you a present, but it's you who pays". They are all financed by taxation, without a single euro being taken from the rich and the bosses: an increase of €100 per month for employees on the minimum wage "without this costing their employer anything", an end of year bonus in enterprises (at the choice of the employers), the return of the tax exemption on overtime, the cancellation of the increase in a tax which helps finance social security for pensioners whose income is less than €2,000 and so on. It's a trick, but symbolically they have retreated!

Until March 15, 2019 a "Grand Débat" has been organised, where everyone can express themselves in their neighbourhood or on the internet. This debate is entirely steered and locked down, with closed questions of the type "what taxes should be lowered", "should some public services be suppressed", "how should the ecological transition be financed: by levies, by taxes? and so on» etc. and open questions of the "keep talking" type! Although this fraud has not fooled the Gilets Jaunes, it allows a mobilisation of the media and gives more space to the discourse of the government and Macron.

The repression against the "dangerous classes" has reached an unprecedented level, based on the security laws originating from the state of emergency established during the terrorist attacks and deploying an unparalleled level of police violence. There have been thousands of arrests, sometimes preventive as on December 8 in Paris, thousands of bans on demonstrations in certain towns, hundreds of convictions and prison sentences of several months, indeed several years, mostly during expeditious procedures. An 80-year-old woman has been killed by a tear gas grenade, while hundreds of demonstrators have been seriously injured: 4 people have had a hand torn off by grenades, 20 persons have been hurt by flash-balls and stinger grenades, dozens wounded by fragments of explosive grenades, hundreds molested. Tens of thousands of non-violent

demonstrators have been compared (by Macron) to a “hateful mob”. The government demands the adoption of a new hyper-repressive “anti – looters” law.

Here again, the Gilets Jaunes movement has changed the situation. The Macron government, like that of Hollande, has used and abused repression as a political weapon: generalisation of the measures originating from the state of emergency, repression and criminalisation, generalisation of the methods applied to the popular neighbourhoods and immigrants in all the social and political expressions with the media focusing on scenes of confrontation to undermine the mobilisations. But the scenes of violence have not reduced the tacit support of the population for the Gilets Jaunes movement: it is the police who are seen as largely responsible for the violence. And a mobilisation has begun against the use of flash-balls (the last resort before real bullets) and explosive grenades, supported by human rights organisations. The multiplication of complaints and investigations is weakening the government’s repressive policy.

Who are the Gilets Jaunes?

The movement has made visible those who have been made invisible, bearing witness to the condescending paternalism, indeed the class contempt of the media and the dominant which has been openly expressed towards this mobilisation without representatives or the spokespersons so important to the political-media world. It is a movement of workers, employees, the unemployed, the precarious, pensioners, artisans, micro-entrepreneurs... For half of them it is their first mobilisation, while others are sometimes former or current trades unionists, especially among the retired.

Nearly half of them are women. They are not the poorest sectors, but modest layers who mostly own a car and live in the popular neighbourhoods of the towns and the rural and peripheral deserts: there are hardly any Gilets Jaunes in the big cities and notably in Paris. When the Gilets Jaunes demonstrate in the city centres, it is in spaces which are not familiar to them.

Every day 17 million people go to work outside of their municipality of residence, 14 million of them having to use their personal vehicle, joining the inhabitants of the small towns forgotten by metropolization, where jobs are increasingly rare as 80% of jobs created are in the 15 biggest cities. Spatial segregation has relegated them still further, in the neighbourhoods, the small towns distant from the big conurbations, places deprived of any public service, of everything needed to live properly. They have to work hard in increasingly difficult conditions, but find it hard to make both ends meet, to live decently, with dignity. They experience a downgrading and in addition to this are subject to the mockery of the élites!

They speak up, denounce the growing inequalities, the difficulties of their everyday life, and the contempt and arrogance of the dominant. This popular exasperation has an obvious class character, which explains its popularity in all layers of the popular classes. Because it is a profound social movement coming from a part of the class of the exploited and oppressed as it is today in France. A class which is fragmented and rendered precarious, with various statuses. The majority of the employees who are in this mobilisation do not have contact with #trade union organisations, strikes, or collective defence. When a worker becomes self-employed because they can no longer bear the hierarchy, or because they can’t find a job, they find themselves alongside artisans who are strangled by the banks and the big groups. All of them live in the same neighbourhoods, the same zones, the same conditions of relative relegation, the same grind.

What demands?

The mobilisation began from the rejection of a new increase in the carbon tax on fuels, which was socially unjust and ineffective at the ecological level. The anti-tax character which seemed to dominate at the beginning and the attempts at instrumentalization by the far right were relativized by the specific dynamic of the movement, which broadened considerably: fuel taxes were only “the straw that broke the camel’s back”. The reject of injustice has provoked a movement towards a more global social opposition. The point of departure was then quickly overtaken by the drawing up of a set of demands, going beyond the denunciation of tax injustices to the rejection of governmental measures, and advancing offensive demands.

We cannot reduce popular aspirations to purely material demands, even if they are certainly present. There is in the speed and depth of a mobilisation which rejects state arbitrariness and the denial of democracy, the expression of a profound emotion, well beyond material demands alone, which seek to translate into figures this rejection of injustice. They are “fed up” with the contempt of the powerful, can no longer bear the humiliation which is forced on them by society and particularly president Macron.

What are the demands of the movement?

- Against an unjust tax system: the rich enjoy tax breaks like the suppression of the wealth tax (ISF) while the public services are in a poor indeed inaccessible state. Tax evasion should be punished, and each should contribute according to their means.
- Against the accumulation of attacks against purchasing power and the retired, expressing the moral imperative that the weakest should be protected, that workers are paid fairly, that solidarity functions, that public services are ensured.
- Rejection of the contempt of the powerful and humiliation - the demand for dignity and respect explain the focusing against Macron. He represents the oligarchy, he is the president of the rich who, through his haughty and contemptuous exercise of power, incarnates a policy of inequality, a world of superiors and inferiors. “Macron resign” is thus the most popular slogan everywhere!
- The discredit of the political system and elected representatives as well as the will to find means to make themselves heard and to place at the centre the demand for a real democracy, which is not reduced to the right to vote. This is the meaning of the demand for the citizens’ initiative referendum (RIC). In the anger against injustice and the dominant, in the solidarity of the dominated seeking to build a new political expression.
- With this the political dimension, the experience of meeting places, of social and friendship links which break with isolation, individualisation and solitude.

Reaction to the neoliberal offensive

The Gilets Jaunes movement is the reaction of a part of the popular classes to four decades of neoliberal offensive which has amplified and deepened social inequalities. The dominant class has failed to maintain its leading role, its authority: it can no longer impose consent on the exploited and oppressed. Macron had benefited when elected from the discrediting of the political parties who had led neoliberal policies since the 1980s. His project of an ultra-neoliberal policy in the framework of an authoritarian political regime today comes up against a sizable obstacle: the reaction of its victims!

Since his election, he has implemented policies which amplify the neoliberal politics of previous governments. He wished to impose often-postponed neoliberal reforms through ostentatious use of the monarchical institutions of the Fifth Republic. [2] Surrounded by political personnel in his own image, he ruled out any discussion of compromise with the parties and trade unions. For this oligarchy, democracy is a waste of time, in extreme cases consultations might be envisaged, but never negotiations.

The Gilets Jaunes movement opposes unjust policies and the government and president deemed responsible for them but does not target the employers or capitalist exploitation as such. It calls for a reparation of the most flagrant injustices. As Samuel Hayat has written: "Their list of social demands is the formulation of essentially moral economic principles: it is imperative that the most fragile (the homeless, the disabled and so on) are protected, that workers are properly paid, that solidarity works, that public services are provided, tax evaders are punished... This is surely what gives strength to the movement, and its massive support in the population: it articulates, in the form of social demands, principles of moral economy that the current regime has attacked explicitly, or even boasted about. From this, the coherence of the movement is better understood, as is the fact that it was able to do without centralized organizations". [3]

The dynamic of the movement has followed its course without the political and trade union organisations playing a role. This movement has confronted the government full on, but also the trade union and political leaders! The contrast has been stark between the massive support of the population, primarily the popular classes and the caricature made in many left circles. But in the workplaces, while employees massively supported the movement, there is not for now any contagion in the form of strike action, even when unionists and radical activists have sought to mobilise for this.

If the leaders of France insoumise, like Jean-Luc Mélenchon or François Ruffin, like Olivier Besancenot of the Nouveau parti anticapitaliste (NPA) have supported the movement, all the big trade union organisations, not only the CFDT and FO but also the CGT, refused to support the demonstrations. On the ground, some union and activist structures have given their support and called for participation in the actions of the gilets jaunes. The absence of unitary reaction from the trade union organisations to the violent repression and arrests of December 1st and 8th, for example in the form of a day of strike action with demonstrations across France, was a missed opportunity to show support for members of the popular classes in struggle.

The situation began to change In January: in numerous towns, the trade union "gilets rouges" were increasingly present and accepted in the demonstrations. And when the CGT alone called, albeit tardily, for a 24-hour strike on Tuesday February 5, significant sectors of the Gilets Jaunes called for it to be made a "renewable general strike". This was reflected by demonstrations more numerous than those of the Gilets Jaunes alone or of the trade union organisations alone. For those who participated in these demonstrations the convergence was real and with a real joy at being together. Also, this coming together showed a certain resistance to the most reactionary currents. However, we are a long way from a 24-hour general strike, let alone a renewable strike. There is for now no qualitative change in the mobilisation of other sectors of the popular classes.

A product of successive defeats for the social movement

The movement also directly questions the trade union movement on the (in)effectiveness of its modes of action. The existence of the gilets jaunes is the product of the succession of defeats of the social movement in recent years in France. Their novelty, tenacity and successes cruelly highlight

the limits of the struggles of recent years. In the period of the post war boom, the class conflict was a form of link inside society: the capitalists negotiated with the workers' movement over social security, pensions management, professional training and so on. For the neoliberals, as Thatcher put it, "there is no such thing as society", there are individuals and the market. Exit the trade union movement. The state is the guarantor of competition and when it is necessary, as it increasingly is, it ensures repression.

The policies pursued by the capitalists of economic restructuring have reduced the capacity of blockade of the economy by strikes in the workplace. The industrial groups are increasingly large and internationalized with increasingly small units of production, dispersed by subcontracting. Only 34% of employees work in enterprises employing more than 500 persons and a good part of these are in workplaces of smaller size. With some rare notable exceptions (refineries, transport and so on) employees do not feel that their strike will be effective. Increasingly, working conditions - with the explosion of precarious work - and workplace activism with the effects of the law on staff representation - have changed. If we add the unemployed and the self-employed, the sector of the exploited and oppressed who are in contact with trade union organisations is increasingly limited.

The recent national mobilisations (pensions, employment law) saw a succession of demonstrations, sometimes very powerful, mobilising millions of people, but incapable of doing more than allowing a counting of the numbers of the discontented. We are no longer in the period where the power of demonstrations carries the threat of another level of confrontation. Today these union demonstrations are, on the contrary (including when they are massive), the mark of impotence. We demonstrate because we have no other means of effective pressure. Also, the political organisations no longer structure employees at the workplaces and have only an electoral relation with the popular classes, that is a very distant one!

The appearance of the Gilets Jaunes, after that of Nuits Debout, outside of the old frameworks, highlights the externality of the organised social movement with respect to many sectors of the popular layers in which these organisations no longer have any implantation. The Nuit Debout movement, although limited in France, had mobilised other social layers, urban youth, more educated, more inclined to debate, although also outside the organised social movement, who sought to change the relationship of forces by the occupation of town squares. There was in this movement as in that of the Gilets Jaunes a rejection of all the organisations who seemed useless, indeed harmful, in any case not adapted to the situation, not responding to the needs of the dominated. This externality also affects the existing associations who are not perceived as natural representatives of those who want to take action. Thus #citizens' appeals to feminist (#Metoo) or ecologist (#ilestencoretemps) mobilisations have multiplied.

The movement of Gilets Jaunes also highlights the fact that the workplaces are no longer the centre of organisation of class confrontation. It has sought and found other places (roundabouts), other tools (the social networks), other forms (blockades, undeclared demonstrations), and other targets (the wealthier neighbourhoods, the sites of governmental power).

Horizontal self-organisation

What acerbic comments have been made on a movement which is not capable of having representatives! No representatives does not necessarily mean no organisation, debates or democracy. These sectors of the popular classes have built collectives, have sought to come together outside of the workplaces, in public spaces like the roundabouts and highway toll booths. What is completely unexpected is the dimension of national importance of a spontaneous movement which

has developed simultaneously everywhere through thousands of local coordinated actions. The social networks have linked individuals who don't know each other, in a manner which is quite horizontal and egalitarian, although mediated by the algorithms of the said social networks. But the power of social networks alone cannot explain the breadth of the movement.

Little by little, it is around these roundabout groups that the movement has spontaneously organised. Where they have lasted, groups have been created under the most diverse forms: from the group which meets regularly, decides by majority vote after debating its actions, and also has a public expression, to the sector which decides without any debate and those who are there, sometimes with a self-proclaimed leader. Sometimes one or several roundabouts designate a spokesperson. Each group decides by itself what its rules will be, here the far right excludes an anti-capitalist activist, elsewhere it is the opposite! For common actions, the basics are decided on the social networks. A group makes a proposal, for example the occupation of a shopping centre, sends the information on social networks, the others react, or not. The action takes place if there are enough people.

The weekly Saturday demonstrations are increasingly joined by other participants, sometimes trades unionists. During these demonstrations, the route is decided by informal consensus (when it is not imposed by reaction to police offensives). It is a movement where everybody decides what they do, most often in tacit agreement with their group. For most participants, including those who are union members, and have participated in strikes, it is the first time that they have decided and acted thus by themselves.

Obviously, this absence of structuring allows different manoeuvres, both personal and in terms of the far right groups. If the far right is not dominant in the movement, as shown by the fact that it has not succeeded in imposing the anti-immigrant theme, it is all the same present at certain roundabouts and in the demonstrations. In the latter, the absence of any democratic structuring allows small groups to organise operations like that of the demonstration of December 1 in Paris, or the attack against the NPA contingent on January 26, 2019. Globally the surveys indicate that a third of participants declare themselves "apolitical", neither right nor left, and among those who take a position, more than 40% identify as left, 15% far left, less than 15% on the right and around 5% on the far right.

The desire of the Gilets Jaunes to be in control of their decisions and actions at the local level has undoubtedly rooted the movement and contributed to its success. But it needs to be coordinated at the regional and national level. The maturing of the movement has not so far produced any democratic structuring. The beginnings of national structuring through the Assembly of Assemblies at the initiative of the group in Commercy are positive, but still limited. The meeting held on January 27, 2019 brought together 350 people, but only about 60 mandated delegates from roundabouts/groups/local assemblies, and about 20 observer delegations, not counting individual participants and journalists.

The absence of a democratic national debate reinforces one of the constitutive features of the movement: the imperative of unanimity. Demands are advanced which can immediately gain a consensus. The citizens' initiative referendum (RIC) is a typical example, points that are likely to divide are side-lined. The desire for a homogeneous people without divisions leads to denying the political dimension of its action. Cleavages, contradictions are repressed. But there are debates between various options. For example, there is an option more open to negotiation, a "dégagiste" option (simply getting rid of the existing regime without stating what should take its place), an electoral option that calls for the formation of a political movement in the fashion of the Italian "5-star" movement, which for the moment has not taken on. Finally, national-identitarian options can also take root.

Overcoming the rejection of political debate is one of the key issues. The “people” is neither homogeneous nor unanimous, it is traversed by divergent interests and opinions. It is the disappearance of oppression and exploitation that will allow equality and social justice, not the negation of their existence. Oppressions are not soluble in the invocation of a “people”, fighting them requires the self-organization of those concerned. Far from suppressing politics, direct democracy can express different social choices. We must accept the political antagonism, the conflict, which is necessary for democracy.

The movement has advanced some debates

- On the issues of ecology and climate change. While we are witnessing the development of the climate movement - regular and numerous climate marches since September, with the success of the petition “l’affaire du siècle”, supporting legal action against the French government for its inaction on climate change, which has received more than 2 million signatures. The increase of the carbon tax on fuels has appeared for what it is: unfair socially (like other indirect taxes that penalize the poor more than the rich) and ecologically inefficient. The moralization/punishment of the use of the car is ineffective while the car is imposed by the entire organization of work, housing, public services. Capitalism is not content to exploit labour power but structures time and living spaces, shaped by the car, land speculation, social and economic organization centred around some major cities in the context of neoliberal globalization.

This spatial segregation has been highlighted by those who are forgotten and sacrificed, deprived of public services and all that is necessary to live properly. The indispensable link between social justice and climate justice has moved forward, in the slogans of the climate marches and the concerns of the environmental movement.

- The place of women: Many are surprised by their strong presence, which contrasts with their low visibility in trade union and political action. Their mobilization reveals that they are the majority of the working poor, part-time, precarious, poor pensioners and so on. It shatters the invisibility of this part of the proletariat, responsible for most work in care, in health, in personal services and so on. They are little recognized, poorly paid, with difficult working conditions, many raise their children alone. The demands do not only concern work and wages, but also everything that makes up life, such as housing, transport and access to public services - issues that women are mainly concerned with and that are not taken up by trades unionism.

And now?

This huge upheaval opens new possibilities ... but nothing is written in advance. There is a difference between the most mobilized segment (up to 500,000 people) and what is happening politically in the rest of the population. The deep trend of the rise of the extreme right is not reversed, on the contrary. The evolution in the confrontation has an anti-Macron dynamic, questioning neoliberal capitalist choices, but the current political dynamic is such that movements of this type can also benefit the extreme right: the movement cannot itself alone resolve these debates spontaneously. While the far right can take advantage of the Gilet Jaunes movement, it would be wrong to think that it is the movement that strengthens the far right.

The few hundred thousand Gilet Jaunes supported by the vast majority of the population have managed to destabilize Macron and his government, but it is clear that to make it give way, it is necessary to set in motion the other layers of the exploited and oppressed, those who, if they support

this movement, have not themselves taken action. It is not enough to say “convergence” to unify all anger, and above all it cannot be done under a single banner, even that of the Gilets Jaunes which has shown its effectiveness. This unity in action of the exploited and oppressed can only be achieved in the cross-fertilization of forms of organization and means of action, in the recognition that there is no homogeneous people, but that oppressions, dominations (gender, class, race) require the self-organization of those concerned to fight them.

We live in an unprecedented situation with an impetuous, inventive and uncontrollable social movement. In extremis, we finally celebrate by struggle the 50th anniversary of May 68, with this mobilization of Gilets Jaunes whose characteristics show how much the conditions of class struggles have changed over the past 50 years. It’s an upheaval, we have entered the 21st century! But, if the current movement has created a major political crisis, we are far from inverting the fundamental dynamics of the period, that of “the possibility of fascism”, inscribed in the global relationship of forces.

This new wave of mobilization again shows the glaring absence of a political expression of the exploited and oppressed and of a useful political tool for their daily action. Such an activist collective, network, organization can only be built around an emancipatory project, from a political perspective, which must be developed from the demands for social justice, redistribution of wealth and democracy. From real movements, from collectives to movements, rethinking democratic forms of organization ... this is more than ever the task of anti-capitalists, revolutionaries, and those who want to end exploitation and oppression.

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P.S.

- Translation IVP, 17 February 2019:
<http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article5945>

Footnotes

[1] The Contrat Première Embauche (First Employment Contract) was introduced under the Chirac government with the aim of making it easier to dismiss employees.

[2] Including dismantling by decree of entire sections of the Employment Code and the law of dismissal, a wage freeze, strengthened control of the unemployed, pension reform with introduction of a points system, suppression of public sector jobs, an increase in the general social contribution for pensioners, including the poorest, reform of vocational training, questioning of the SNCF’s public service obligations and a new pension reform.

[3] « Les Gilets jaunes, l’économie morale et le pouvoir » 5 décembre 2018. Available on ESSF (article 47262), [Passé présent : Les Gilets Jaunes, l’économie morale et le pouvoir](#).