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Assault on pensions: French Unions, Yellow Vests Converge, Launch General Strike Today

Saturday 7 December 2019, by [Gilets Jaunes d'Uzès et Montpellier](#), [GREEMAN Richard](#) (Date first published: 5 December 2019).

(Montpellier, France) On the eve of an “unlimited” (open-ended) General Strike called for Dec. 5, more and more unions and protest groups are pledging join in.

Two things are unusual about this strike. The first is that it is open-ended, rather than the usual one-day ritualistic protest marches, and it may be prolonged from day to day by workers' assemblies as long as necessary. The second is that the Yellow Vests, the self-organized, horizontal, social movement that sprung up spontaneously just over a year ago and is still popular despite severe repression, have decided to converge with the strike.

Just as surprising, Philippe Martinez Secretary General of CGT, France's largest union federation, who had originally spurned the Yellow Vests, immediately welcomed them, making for a heady mix. For the union leaders, who try to control their followers tightly, the Yellow Vests are like a loose canon on the deck of a ship. Who knows what may result?

The nation-wide strike was originally proposed by the CGT's Martinez, in response to the Macron Governments' proposed neoliberal “reform” of the France retirement system. Macron's reform would essentially gut France's solidarity-based retirement system. Even more than U.S. Social Security, which even Trump and the Republicans don't dare touch, retirement over here is a sacred cow. It was established at the end of WWII when the Resistance and the Communists were influential and the business class was in bad odor, having collaborated with the Nazis. Under Macron's proposed new 'point' system, many will lose up to 30% according to estimates, and future governments could arbitrarily decide how much money each point is worth!

The Camel's Back

This latest, and most sweeping of Macron's two years' string of neo-liberal attacks on social welfare may prove to be the straw that breaks the camel's back; and camels are dangerously irascible animals known to bite or kick their masters to death when mistreated.

The French were already in an angry mood in the Spring of 2018 when Macron started pushing through his reforms, but they were disappointed when the CGT and other union leaders imposed only stop-and-go, limited, local strikes and failed utterly to counter-attack. It was on the grave of those defeats that the spontaneous Yellow Vest movements sprung up like mushrooms all over France last November, supported by over 70% of the French.

Although justifiably suspicious of unions, especially of the union leaders, the Yellow Vests, after suffering a year of police brutality and prejudiced media coverage, came around to the need for convergence. Thus, at our fourth national Assembly of Assemblies on Nov. 3, we voted to join and “be at the heart” of the Dec. 5 movement in the hope that “a defeat for the government would open

the road to other victories for our camp.”

Will the union leaders like Martinez stay the course? If they try to settle with Macron piecemeal and divide the movement as they have in the past, will the workers’ assemblies be able to stop them? Will the strike over retirement benefits develop along broad social revolutionary lines like similar horizontal movements in South America, the Middle East and elsewhere? Will these international movements finally connect, as the Yellow Vests’ Assembly of Assembly proposed when it dedicated our first anniversary to social movements around the world?

Richard Greeman

“One for all and all for one !”

The following leaflet, developed by the Yellow Vests of Uzès and Montpellier, expresses the hopes and fears of the Yellow Vests on the eve of this open-ended struggle:

For the past two years, a government of the rich has been imposing « reforms » designed to deprive the French people of all the advantages won by several generations of workers. For the past two years, Macron, “President of the rich,” following the rules laid down by the European Union of bankers and in defiance of the people, has been using police-state methods to increase the inequality of an already unequal society for the benefit of his Stock Market cronies through tax advantages and privatizations.

Today, by attacking their retirements, this would-be Jupiter has succeeded in uniting the French people - against him ! United, we have the power to make him withdraw his so called « reform » of our pensions. That’s obvious. But we must not stop there. We must stick together and make use of our united strength to impose all our demands : wages, unemployment benefits, public services, hospitals, schools, agricultural lands, ecological justice, fiscal justice....

Macron has sowed the wind.

On December 5 he will harvest the whirlwind :

An Unlimited General Strike to take back our France

Don’t let them divide us ! Let no branch, no trade, no sector return to work until **everyone’s** demands have been satisfied. Let us stick together, for we all depend on one another. Leave no one behind !

- **The nurses and doctors** of the emergency rooms and hospitals are struggling for all of us. They are demanding more beds, more personnel, more materials and of course decent salaries and breaks. They just made a pact with the firefighters : a fine example of solidarity between respected professionals. These are the people who look after us when we are most vulnerable. Should we leave them behind ?

- **Working women** earn only 4/5 of the wages of men doing the same work, and they do 4/5 of the unpaid labor of homemaking, cooking and child-rearing. They are the true basis of civilization, yet

many women are beaten, murdered, raped or trafficked in France - all too often with impunity. They are asking for justice. Should we leave them behind ?

- The majority of **working people** have long been financially insecure. Even when they work full time or do extra jobs. Although the productivity of their labor and the profits of their bosses have not stopped increasing, the men and women who create this wealth live in fear of the end of the month, in permanent worry of unemployment, anxious about their employers closing shop and moving to poor countries where labor is cheaper. The workers are fighting for decent wages and stable employment. Should we leave them behind ?

- **Students and teachers** are demanding less over-crowded classrooms, aids and assistance for handicapped and special students, the right to participate in developing curriculums that correspond to the needs of the young and not to the demands of employers. They are our children. Should we leave them behind ?

- **Small farmers** work hard to feed us and get back only 2-3% of the price their produce sells for at Carrefour. Young people who want to raise organic crops and develop permaculture are unable to find agricultural lands to buy or rent, while real-estate speculators are paving over fertile soils. On the other hand, our government is subsidizing big land-owners and agro-businesses who stuff us with chemicals and Frankenfoods. Obesity is on the rise. The French peasantry, the salt of the earth, is in crisis. Should we leave them behind ?

- Macron wants to privatize the French National Railways (SNCF) for the benefit of his cronies, who have already taken over the National Highway System which we had already paid for tenfold. Today, trains are more and more expensive and less and less on time. The government is closing smaller stations, isolating the people in the countryside and forcing everyone to buy cars. The **railway workers** are defending these public goods on which we all depend. Yet Macron calls them "privileged." The government has already reduced their rolling personnel to one (!) per train. Since September, the railway staff have been using their legal right to stop trains in case of public danger - without asking management or their union leaders for permission. Should we leave them behind ?

- The planet is on the brink of climate catastrophe, while the government goes on subsidizing the oil, coal and chemical companies that are raking in billions. We must immediately cut these gifts to the rich and use that money for ecological purposes, for example helping the inhabitants of Rouen who have been poisoned by industry. Should we leave them behind ?

- **Immigrants and ethnic minorities** do the most grueling work in France without enjoying the rights of citizens, while French imperialist companies are getting richer pillaging their native lands and making them unlivable. They are being discriminated, deported, brutally repressed by the police. They are demanding liberty, equality and fraternity. Should we leave them behind ?

- **The Yellow Vests** come from all these underprivileged and exploited groups. They are the glue that holds all these elements together in the struggle. For more than a year they have been brutally repressed while fighting for dignity, fiscal justice, equality and participatory democracy. They have kept Macron on the defensive at great cost. Should we leave them behind ?

An Injury to One is an Injury to All!

A general strike is not handed down by the heads of labor Federations, but decided from below, by the rank-and-file, in assemblies, on roundabouts, in neighborhoods, factories, hospitals and public services, including all those excluded from the « labor market » - the unemployed, semi-employed, handicapped, homeless and other workers with or without documents. Experience shows : strikes by

separate trades called by unions alone are doomed to failure.

The general strike will be decided on by the women and men who are fighting for a decent living against social injustice and climate chaos. By the women and men who are standing up against racism and xenophobia in every sector of society. In brief, by those who are fed up living dreary lives, filled with worries for tomorrow, without desirable perspectives for themselves and their children. So, beginning Dec. 5, let us join together in solidarity with each other and throw all our strength into the struggle.

Let us stick together to the end. Let no sector defect. The strike will end when everyone is satisfied. If we all pitch in together, the strike will not have to last long. Our demands are reasonable. If Monsieur Macron can't fulfill them, he could be replaced by someone more reasonable. So could the system that puts profits before the well-being of the people and the planet!

Like the representatives of the Third Estate in 1789, let us swear an oath not to separate until we have all had satisfaction.

Block Everything ! Change Everything !

Unlimited General Strike ! Unlimited General Dream !*

<http://noussoimmesgiletsjaunes34.fr/>

**Pun on Grève (strike) and Rêve (dream)*

P.S.

• New Politics, December 5, 2019:

<https://newpol.org/french-unions-yellow-vests-converge-launch-general-strike-today/>

• Richard Greeman is a Marxist scholar long active in human rights, anti-war, anti-nuclear, environmental and labor struggles in the U.S., Latin America, France, and Russia. Greeman is best known for his studies and translations of the Franco-Russian novelist and revolutionary Victor Serge (1890-1947). Greeman also writes regularly about politics, international class struggles and revolutionary theory. Co-founder of the Praxis Research and Education Center in Moscow, Russia, and director of the International Victor Serge Foundation, Greeman splits his time between Montpellier, France and New York City.