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Opinion

Yellow Vests, Act Four: where is France going? Macron's Project Fear

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Saturday's huge *Gilets Jaunes* mobilisation across France defied Macron's Project Fear, as high school students facing state repression join a movement that continues to rise. John Mullen reports from Paris.

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Gilets Jaunes in Lille on Saturday 8 December in mass solidarity gesture with the detained high school students of Mantes-la-Jolie, of whom around a hundred were put in the stress position illustrated when detained by armed police following their protest. Photo: @GiletsJaunes_FR

Saturday's huge *Gilets Jaunes* mobilisation across France defied Macron's Project Fear, as high school students facing state repression join a movement that continues to rise. John Mullen reports from Paris.

It is hard to count demonstrators spread out across thousands of mobilisations, but it seems that over half a million people were involved in "Act Four" of the Yellow Vest mobilisation in France on Saturday 8th December. In Bordeaux a huge joint demonstration between university students and Yellow Vests chanted "Students and Yellow Vests, same Macron, same struggle!". In Toulouse, Lyon, Saint Etienne, Marseilles, Dieppe and dozens of other towns many thousands marched. Even in smaller places like Albi or Auch there was a fine Yellow Vests demonstration.

A lively picket was organised in front of the factory in Sarthe which makes tear gas grenades. At Saint-Avold in the East of France a replica of a guillotine was placed at a major roundabout. A few days earlier in the port of Saint Nazaire in Brittany, demonstrators repainted the banks of the town

in bright yellow, while a cake shop owner in the South started selling special lemon eclairs in the form of a Yellow Vest protester!

A people's movement like this can never stand still: it has to keep rising or it will quickly decline. People make sacrifices to go out and occupy the roundabouts and motorway toll booths, they find the time and money to go to Paris or to the regional capital for the Saturday demonstration, and they live the stressful life of activism. But they want results. Although the togetherness and the dignity of resistance are important to people, unless some progress is seen each week, the temptation to go home, watch TV, and repaint your bathroom instead will tend to win out.

A rising movement

This last week, there was none of that - there has been tremendous progress. First, hundreds of high schools have been blockaded by the students, and demonstrations organised in Paris, Lille, Marseilles and elsewhere. This new mobilisation is inspired by the Yellow Vests, but based on specific demands of the young people - against recent reforms making it harder to get into university, and against the government decision to make foreign students pay around 3,000 euros a year tuition fees (as against around 300 at the moment).

In several universities - Rennes Toulouse and Paris Nanterre among others - mass meetings of thousands have voted to blockade their universities and join the Yellow Vest movement. Dozens of motorway toll booths are still occupied by Yellow Vests letting cars through free, and road blocks are functioning at hypermarkets and roundabouts: serious effects on weekend commerce are visible. At least one hypermarket has closed due to lack of supplies.

Now, energy strikes have been announced for this week, some teaching unions are calling for strikes, and an influential small-farmers movement has called on people to join the revolt. On Saturday 8th December, climate marches in many cities (Paris, Amiens, Nantes) were joined by Yellow Vest people, helping to put to rest the lie that Macron's fuel taxes were somehow green, when in fact he is closing down thousands of kilometres of railway and refuses to make the big oil companies pay their taxes.

In Paris, hospital workers fighting for jobs also joined the Yellow Vests, while ongoing strikes in steel and in oil depots add to the atmosphere of generalised revolt. There are many other developments, but suffice it to say this is still a rising movement.

Macron and his government have responded in three ways: repression, propaganda and concessions. None have been successful: the movement is still on the up and public opinion remains solidly with the Yellow Vests. On the 5th December, polls gave 66% "support or sympathize" with the movement, against 24% "opposed or hostile". A month ago, these figures were 71 % and 11% respectively. In smaller towns, support is stronger; age makes little difference to levels of support, and among manual workers rates of approval are extremely high (78% support or sympathise). And this was one of the polls least favourable to our side. Other polls show that 50% of the population want Macron to resign. You can feel something in the air. The lady who cleans the stairwell in our block of flats proudly displayed yellow vests on the two seat backs of her car.

Repression, propaganda and minor concessions

After a couple of dozen bank branches and a few shops were smashed up in Paris Saturday 1st

December, the government decided to put into action a Project Fear at a level not seen in France these last 35 years. The presidential spokesperson claimed (without any evidence) that a “hard core of several thousand people” were heading for Paris at the weekend “to smash and to kill”. The Eiffel Tower, the Louvre, all the high schools in Paris and a number of other institutions were closed for the day. The huge department stores stopped work too, costing them tens of millions of euros in pre-Christmas sales. Twelve shiny armoured vehicles were trundled out along with fanfares and serious-faced TV commentators reflected all day long on “how the worst can be avoided”, (although sending in the army was ruled out at the last moment).

The reason for Project Fear was partly so that the more vicious of the police chiefs and police sections understood that, whatever happened, they would be covered by the state power. This has had its effect already. Countless videos of teenage demonstrators being thumped kicked and beaten with batons are circulating on social media. Several high school students have been seriously injured, some permanently disfigured by flashballs or teargas canisters. Young people were kept in the cells for 36 hours because they had scrawled graffiti on walls. One anonymous riot policeman told a journalist that for the first time in his career he had received the (illegal) order to aim tear gas grenades directly at demonstrators rather than above their heads. An 80-year-old Arab lady in Marseilles died on the operating table after she was hit by a tear gas grenade while closing her shutters: it seems the police had aimed at the woman deliberately. Two clearly identified photographers from the Le Parisien newspaper were hit with flashballs, and in several big towns, demonstrators were seriously injured. 1,700 people were arrested across France on 8th December.

And then there was that video, which has gone viral, of the dozens of schoolchildren in Mantes-la-Jolie forced to kneel with their hands on their heads, like in a police state [1]. The general reaction among the population was deep shock. Colleagues who never talk politics brought up the subject spontaneously at work. Parents’ organisations are making official complaints, and Communist regional councillors and trade unions offered to organise protection for high school student demonstrations. Over the last thirty years, police violence against demonstrators in France has been getting worse, (as previous generations of high school activists can witness). The present clear intensification is meant to warn us that the state power is ready to go much further in future, as its desperate fight to prop up the dictatorship of profit goes on.

Along with Project Fear the state’s public relations experts, who have been working overtime, have come up with some other wizard wheezes. A small right-wing breakaway from the Yellow Vests, which has practically no influence (called the “free Yellow Vests”) is interviewed day and night on the TV news bulletins. Riot police are interviewed anonymously, speaking of how they are terrified to go to the demonstrations and fear for their lives. And some of the media continue to claim that the movement is in the hands of the far right and Macron is the only defence against fascism. In fact, as Yellow Vests joined the climate marches on 8th December (notably in Toulouse and Paris), and the demand for a rise in the minimum wage became more prominent, Marine Le Pen’s influence is slowly waning, since she is radically opposed to progressive action on either of these issues. In the Paris area, calls by Black activist organisations to join the Yellow Vest demos (with their own slogans against racist police violence) have also helped clarify the fundamental political nature of the movement.

Macron trying not to back down

Macron really did not want to cancel the fuel tax rise planned for January, because his reputation of never backing down is at the centre of his strategy. Nevertheless, his Prime Minister, Edouard Philippe announced on Tuesday 4th that the rise had been suspended. The decision was universally

condemned as far too little far too late, and the very next day, Macron himself decided to announce the rise was scrapped not suspended. The episode was seen as a sign of tension between Macron and Edouard Philippe, and rumours that Macron will fire his Prime Minister are being heard. The episode of the wealth tax similarly showed confusion. One of Macron's ministers suggested on Wednesday that a recently abolished wealth tax might be brought back in. Macron corrected her publicly within hours.

Macron is fishing around for other concessions which they can make which will divide the movement without costing too much. A suggestion that employers in the private sector will be encouraged by tax breaks to give a cash bonus of up to 1,000 euros to their workers this year is one idea we are hearing. In officially unrelated areas, concessions are occasionally being found to head off the spread of the movement. 400 million euros of money for hospitals which could not be found for many months was suddenly discovered by Agnès Buzyn, the Minister of Health.

Union leaders

Though local and regional Trade Union organisations often support the Yellow Vest movement, national leaderships are worse than contradictory. I am no fan of excessive rhetoric, but it is hard to avoid the word "treacherous" when you speak of last Thursday's press release, co-signed by all the national trade union confederations except one.

It denounced the violence of demonstrators, but did not mention police violence. It declared that the unions were keen to negotiate at any time with the government, and it neither called on people to join the Yellow Vest protests nor expressed wishes for their success. Since this movement does not have an established leadership, it is hard for professional negotiators to try to close the movement down with complex but minor concessions (as often happens with strike waves), but the trade union bureaucracy seems desperate for a chance to do so.

In Thursday's statement, the dreadful role of the trade union bureaucracy is laid out in all its horror. National trade union leaders in France earn only a fraction of the bloated salaries of British trade union leaders, but their position as professional negotiators still leads them to aim at calming any revolt. The seriousness of the crisis and the mass support for the movement would have justified a call for a one-day general strike - there would have been nothing utopian about such a call - and the union leaders' action shows the dire need for alternative leadership within the working class.

Left trade union confederations like the powerful CGT, however, have contradictory positions. As well as signing the joint statement, the national CGT leadership brought out another press release two hours later denouncing police violence and calling for a large rise in the minimum wage, and their leader Philippe Martinez recently declared that the CGT's job was to get everyone out on strike. Locally, trade unions have offered to organise protection for yellow vest demos against the police, and regional federations of the CGT have often taken a very radical line. The CGT has called for strike action nationally for Friday 14th.

The radical left

Radical and anti-capitalist Left organisations have become more fully involved this week. In parliament, Mélenchon, president of the France Insoumise group of MPs made an impressive speech praising the Yellow Vest movement and predicting that the present government is on its way out. He is worth quoting:

“These are happy days we are living through, because at last France is in general rebellion against an unjust order which has survived for far too long. We have millions of people whom life had made invisible, in metropolitan France and in the overseas territories, and now these millions, the people, are moving onto the stage of the History of France. As an irony of history, this yellow vest has become in a way the new Phrygian bonnet of the French, who are abandoning resignation and isolation, who are abandoning the idea of continuing with harsh suffering in dignified silence.”

The France Insoumise group has demanded a public inquiry into police violence, and along with Communist Party and Socialist Party MP is planning to introduce a parliamentary vote of no confidence in the government on Monday 10th. The far smaller but well rooted New Anticapitalist Party is calling for a general strike.

Act five

It is already a fine victory for our side that a mass of previously unpoliticised people have moved into action, and that a new generation of high-school students have become involved in a struggle to change their lives. These are experiences which will help form the political and psychological forces which will be needed in future battles.

As I write, Macron is preparing a ‘Speech to the Nation’ for Monday evening. He is unlikely to make major concessions; he will try to wait out the movement.

Since it was Friday that the video from Mantes-la-Jolie got around to everybody, we shall see Monday and Tuesday how many high schools and universities move into action. If this coming week, too, is marked by a rising movement, as seems likely, we could be looking at a broader movement aiming at mass strike action soon. The CGT has called a national day of strike action next Friday, the 14th, which will be the next big date. Railway and metro workers are being called out, and other calls will follow in the next few days.

Understandably, some commentators have got a little carried away. France is not on the edge of a revolutionary situation or of a civil war. But the movement is on the rise, and very determined. One Parisian riot policeman who was interviewed complained “people used to be afraid of us, but they aren’t any more. They’re aiming at us, because we’re symbols of the state”.

It is crucial that we make the state’s leaders regret what was done to the schoolkids at Mantes-la-Jolie, and if we do, there is plenty of hope for radical social change.

John Mullen

P.S.

• Counterfire. December 9, 2018:
<https://www.counterfire.org/articles/opinion/20024-yellow-vests-act-four-where-is-france-going-2>

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.facebook.com/philippe.berard.121/posts/2354232094652093>