

France's yellow vests fight on, despite concessions



Social unrest in France is being driven by workers' anger at continuous attacks on jobs, wages and living standards.

French president Emmanuel Macron has found himself in the international news quite a bit this year, mainly as his 'hard man' of French bourgeois politics act has blown up in his face, thanks to the resistance of various workers and students, and he continues to stumble from one crisis to another. Recent events in [France](#) have shown up the chronic lack of a strong communist party, true to the teachings of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin, to guide the actions of the French masses. Whatever it is in the psyche of French workers that allows them to take to the streets almost immediately that an injustice towards them is perceived – just think how much more effectively the actions of those workers would be if they had a dedicated Marxist-Leninist, unflinching proletarian party at their head. Macron and his shrinking band of Thatcher/Blair-loving supporters have looked less sure and confident with every class clash, although they had until recently sufficiently managed to extract some concessions from the leaders of the workers' and students' organisations that have led the opposition to austerity so far to be able to claim that they have not been totally routed in the style of ex-president François Hollande. Enter the 'yellow vests' (*gilet jaunes*). The yellow vest movement (named after the yellow and orange hi-visibility vests worn by the protestors) is a popular 'disagreement' with the French president/government/state that anyone and everyone can join in: simply don a hi-vis vest, or don't if that suits you better, and take to the streets in protest. There are no recognised leaders or even goals, and the reasons people give for their actions range from fuel prices, food prices, housing, education, wages, high taxes, employment, insecurity, health issues, greater welfare needs, etc. Every journalist, every bourgeois politician is trying to find the common cause of the resistance and unrest to address the problem, but at the moment all that can really be said is that the drive towards [austerity](#) to safeguard the wealth of the rich by making the workers pay for the [crisis of capitalism](#) that is engulfing all capitalist states is creating a huge spark of anger and preparedness to resist among French workers who may disagree politically with each other on many issues but who are not prepared to be the scapegoats for the ills of 'the government' – ie, the

bankers, or the imperialist ruling class (the name given to the oppressor is dependent on the political perception/knowledge of individual workers). The yellow vests do not even agree with each other on tactics: some want to march and shout, others prefer confrontation, but all are willing to answer state violence to a certain individual degree and, at the moment, it seems that state repression is not breaking them apart. The various representatives of the French government are alternately blaming the 'left' or the 'right' troublemakers and hardliners, sometimes even blaming both left and right at the same time. Perhaps they will soon be warning of the 'hard-line middle-of-the-roaders' as well? The police have met the yellow vests on the streets with batons, tear gas and water cannons so far and the resistance is giving a good account of itself, but, at the time of writing this short article, while petrol bombs and the firing of gas grenades light up the Champs Élysées for another night to the accompaniment of the hoarse but undiminished chants of "Macron out!" we are aware that the Macron government is considering taking the whole thing up a notch by declaring a 'state of emergency', with all that entails. Whether the state of emergency comes or not, whether or not Macron and his government can manage to buy off enough of the protesters to crush the rest, it must still be obvious to every class-conscious French worker that organisation is the real key to successful resistance, and that organisation must come from a totally trusted source that will always put the real interests of all workers first. In short, the French workers (like the workers of every other country) need a communist party to stand with them, to lead them in struggle and to educate them for their future role as the ruling class. It is the job of the French working class and their allies to build that party. We know that our French comrades have the courage to fight, they must now learn the ideology that will take them to the next stage. As we witness the fifth weekend of protest by the yellow vests it has to be said that President Macron has tarnished, perhaps irreparably, his 'hard man' image, which had seemed so shiny and unassailable not so very long ago. He has tried throwing scraps (concessions if you will) to the wolves, hoping to thin the crowd out enough to regain order,

but in reality they seem only to want his head. When Macron abandoned the fuel tax hikes and offered a package of tax and minimum wage measures as a sop to get peace, the protesters simply made new demands to address other economic issues that are hurting workers, retirees and students. There seems no way out as a sixth protester has lost their life and Macron, not to mention the 0.1 percent of the ruling class he represents, must be wondering for just how long he/they will hold the allegiance of the gendarmes out on the French streets. Each week the numbers arrested grows, and each arrest, each injury and each death of a protester seems to inspire more to join the protest. How many of his ordinary policemen have friends and family out on the streets in hi-vis vests? There has to be a tipping point if nothing else changes, and it cannot be far away. Many more students and children have now taken up the popular struggle, especially after seeing the pictures of armed police holding children, forcing them to kneel with hands tied behind their backs while their captors stood around them indiscriminately pointing guns this way and that. Sixth-form colleges in Paris and other cities have seen students forming barricades against the police. The famed Sorbonne university in Paris was also closed after students, many in yellow vests, tried to storm the building and the gates were locked afterwards. Over 150 schools have been blockaded, and in Marseilles in southern France three lycées (roughly equivalent to our sixth-form colleges) were shut in fear of occupation. Back in the capital, meanwhile, children have set fire to school bins and put padlocks on school gates, beating the authorities to closing them down. The fifth weekend of protest saw some 8,000 police and 14 armoured vehicles deployed in Paris. The protesters in response set up burning barricades, and the protests in the streets spread from Paris to many other towns and cities. The words "Give back the money", which were written on the façade of a bank in Paris, have been taken up nationwide as the yellow vest protesters continue to demonstrate against the massive rise in the costs of living and taxes. Macron, a former investment banker, has become almost the personification of the financial ills falling on workers and the middle classes, and there must now be some consideration going on in the real halls of power as to whether or not to 'give his head' to the people, as it were, in an attempt to buy off the protests. However, those rulers would be extremely reluctant to allow a popular victory against a government trying to shift the cost of the crisis of overproduction onto the workers' shoulders. If anyone should doubt the possible international significance of what is happening in France, we

note with interest that the Egyptian government has decided to restrict the sale of yellow hi-vis vests in fear that Egyptian workers may be inspired to copy French protesters. More seriously, certainly for the European Union (EU), France looks very likely to overshoot the EU's budget deficit ceiling next year, having failed to push through the 'necessary' sharper public spending cuts that had been planned but which now seem impossible to implement after Macron's partial step-back following the anti-government protests. When Macron announced wage increases for the poorest workers and a tax cut for most pensioners in an effort to buy off the protests he blew a €10bn (\$11bn) hole in the treasury's finances, which will push France back over the EU deficit limit of 3 percent of national output and leave Macron's reformist credentials somewhat tattered. However, when Prime Minister Edouard Philippe announced: "We are preparing a fiscal boost for workers by accelerating tax cuts so that work pays," he also added: "That inevitably has consequences on the deficit." The protesters rightly fear that the 'consequences on the deficit' will be clawed back from some other part of public spending, as Phillippe did not give any details on the impact of the concessions on public finances or possible spending cuts but merely stated that the government "aimed to keep spending from increasing". And so, it is the sensible wariness of the protesters, who have seen so many broken and twisted promises by various governments, that is behind their collective, almost instinctive, decision to stay on the streets and keep making new anti-austerity demands. If France cannot keep its budget under the EU deficit ceiling, we are told by faceless EU spokesmen, it could shatter France's 'fiscal credibility' with its European partners (it has to be said that France has not kept under that deficit ceiling for the last ten years). Any sign of leniency for the French government from Brussels could start a crescendo of deficits shooting into space across the EU. The European Union is to make a final assessment of France's 2019 budget in the second quarter of next year with the release of new economic forecasts, but it is definitely jittery about the 'goings on' in France, both in terms of the fragile deficit ceilings and because of the example that is being set by the French workers on how to resist austerity. Those defiant yellow-vested protesters may very well be fighting for us all more than they realise. More power to their collective arms.

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