

# French Anti-Pass Demonstrations on the Eve of the Presidential Election

September 16, 2021



*John Barzman was born in Los Angeles and lives in France. He is professor emeritus at the University of Le Havre in Normandy where he teaches contemporary history and American civilization. He was formerly an activist in the United States. He is the author of *Dockers, métallos, ménagères : mouvements sociaux et cultures militantes en France 1912-1923*. New Politics co-editor, Dan La Botz, conducted the interview.*

**New Politics - What are the recent demonstrations in France all about? Who is taking part in them? What do they want?**

**John Barzman** - The present Saturday afternoon city center demonstrations in France began on July 17, in response to President Macron's televised announcement on July 12 that the COVID epidemic continued to be a problem and his proposal to institute a «sanitary pass». This followed overly optimistic predictions that the end of the pandemic was in sight. The protests tried to influence votes on the law in the National Assembly and Senate until the measure was adopted July 24. They then shifted to encourage disobedience and resistance. Growing numbers of people attended until about August 14: hundreds of thousands in over two hundred cities, with larger turnouts in southeastern France where the far-right gets more votes. After that date, a slight decline was observed, possibly linked to the steady increase in vaccinations.

The initiators included dissident leftists from the CGT (France's largest labor federation), France Insoumise (Jean-Luc Mélenchon supporters), SUD (a radical union federation), as well as the Gilets Jaunes, (Yellow Jackets), antivax conspiracy networks like Reinfocovid, New Age «self-development» gurus, and undercover far-right militants posing as apolitical citizens. Their immediate success was due both to growing discontent with the «anti-social» policies of the Macron government (retirement, downsizing public hospitals, unemployment compensation), authoritarian measures as well as his mishandling of the pandemic. They were also able to tap into pre-existing protests :

surviving Gilets Jaunes groups, antivax actions visible on May Day for example, police and health workers' actions, those who had participated in the «Nuit Debout» (Stay all Night) protests of 2016.

The Saturday rallies have few picket signs and banners; they rely mainly on social network interactions. They are officially «single issue»: only against the health pass, uniting non-vaccinated and vaccinated people, pro-vax and antivax. In fact they are overwhelmingly antivax and the most obvious target of hatred is President Macron. Under the influence of antivax and far-right groups, the slogans have sometimes added: «against obligatory vaccination», «freedom of choice» or simply «Freedom».

### **NP - What is the “pass sanitaire,” the health pass, at the center of these protests?**

**John Barzman** - The sanitary pass is an electronic document (which can be printed on paper) to be shown by individuals (usually with their mobile phones) to controllers. It was to be used first, in July and August, in museums, restaurants, long-distance transport and the like, then, beginning on September 15, to verify vaccination or alternatively a recent negative test in «front-line» professions (health workers and others in contact with the public), under penalty of suspension from their job.

All parties of the left represented in parliament (France Insoumise, the Communist Party, PCF; EELV Greens, Socialist Party, SP; and their satellites) voted against the pass, but did not plan any action against it, either because they were on summer holidays, or more likely because they were almost totally absorbed by promotion of their candidates for the presidential elections scheduled for April 10 and 24, 2022. Trade union federations were also relatively quiet, leaving the field open to «bottom up» citizen initiatives and the far right.

Focusing on the sanitary pass allows several sources of discontent to converge and produce an extremely heterogeneous movement. Here are some currents that caught my attention.

1) Small business owners, sometimes economically vulnerable, such as owners of restaurants and bars, theaters and clubs, personal care establishments, some of whom had benefited from the generous compensations distributed by the government during the early phase of the pandemic, feared that their recovery would be jeopardized by the pass.

2) A minority of health workers, overworked, underpaid, disoriented by the zigzags of government policy on the epidemic and lack of recognition of their efforts in underequipped and understaffed hospitals, also decided to refuse to comply.

3) Transit workers and some teachers wondered how they would be affected.

4) Followers of non-traditional medicine (naturopathic, homeopathic, yoga), opponents of over-reliance on medication and «Big Pharma», admirers of dissident medical researcher Didier Raoult, all of which already had a preexisting infrastructure (Internet and street spectacles).

5) Some left militants claimed that the pass increased discrimination because of the lower rate of vaccination in underprivileged neighborhoods, due in reality to underinformation, undereducation, closure of health and other public service antennas, poor transit facilities, unemployment, and poverty.

6) In my opinion, police trade unions have not received the attention of the media in this series of events that they deserved. Just before, they were prominent in a May 19 protest in front of the National Assembly supported by all parties (left and right, except Mélenchon). The demonstration initiated by Alliance (a right-wing police trade union) asked for more funding, more freedom of action, less control of the police by the judiciary. The police claimed that photographers and

journalists as well as reinforced state control of their day-to-day work (cameras, review boards) were an attack on «freedom». In July in the anti-pass movement, while police unions were preparing to bargain with the government on new improvements for the police force and rejection of massive demands for citizen oversight after incidents of police brutality, the police avoided the limelight. Nevertheless, they let it be known that the pass was unnecessary additional work for the police and the first month of demonstrations was free of any police interference. The predominance of the slogan «Freedom» in the abstract allows the unholy alliance of Gilets Jaunes who were brutalized by the police, and policemen who want to be liberated from burdensome citizen control.

7) Anti-authoritarian movements concerned with growing big business and state control over the media, used the internet to play a role, particularly on the social networks. They reject facial identification techniques, denounce public medical record leaks to private health insurance and pharmaceutical companies, and oppose state control over medical practices. This current was the most open to conspiracy theories and neo-fascist influences: they claim Macron is a dictator comparable to Hitler and Pétain, that they are the «Resistance», and that «international finance» is behind the vaccine, with the implication that Jews control the whole process.

### **NP - What is the role of the right in these demonstrations? Who makes up these rightwing groups?**

**John Barzman** - Beyond the broad social and semi-political layers described above, two organized categories should be distinguished: issue-oriented groups and clearly identified ideologies and organizations.

The first category is best represented by Reinfocovid. It has appeared at various moments as denying the gravity of the pandemic, opposed to masks, or vaccinations, and now to the «pass» and to any «vaccinal obligation». It includes dissident embittered nurses, medical doctors, researchers, whose scientific credentials are often unclear. There are also parents concerned with the ability of their children to flirt. And internet influencers too. They tend to support Didier Raoult and his various proposals for alternatives to the best-known remedies, as well as guru Louis Fouché. After July 12, these networks encouraged the formation of Facebook pages titled «Anti pass sanitaire» followed by the name of a city or region, which immediately recruited hundreds of thousands of subscribers. They have equipment : sound systems, musical instruments, disguises (all-white uniforms), speakers and a hierarchy of influencers. They often admire the Trumpist movements of various kinds in the US and imitate their tactics.

The second category encompasses organized far-right groups, generally acting undercover or combining open interventions and quiet infiltration. The context is the decision of the main far right leader, Marine Le Pen, to present her party, Rassemblement national, as conventional republicans («*banalisation*») uninvolved in violence, and capable of uniting the French people («*apaisement*», «*union nationale*»). Her acceptance of the euro caused a split. Her number two leader, Florian Philippot, split and formed the Parti des patriotes with a more «*sovereigniste*» (nationalist) message. As Philipot was stagnating, he seized the opportunity of widespread social discontent, police demonstrations and the anti-pass moment to organize demonstrations in his own name, or in alliance with sections of the Gilets Jaunes. Other far-right groups known as «*identitaires*» have engaged in similar work. They combine this with infiltration of the broader movement promoting the actions called by their leaders, as well as the slogan «Freedom», and a ban on «corrupt» political organizations and trade unions. All of this is quite compatible with a future sudden call for unity behind the far right candidate, be it Marine Le Pen, Eric Zemmour, François Asselineau, or Nicolas Dupont Aignan, in exchange for prominent positions on the Marine Le Pen team. Or a far-right and right coalition, as advocated by Marion Maréchal Le Pen (Marine Le Pen's niece).

Another strong far right current is the Catholic fundamentalist («*intégrisme catholique*») group Civitas. Most recently, this organization acquired a mass audience and experience with organizing demonstrations and tactical relations with middle-of-the-road allies, in demonstrations against the law extending the rights of homosexual couples to marry (the «*Mariage pour tous*» law) in 2012-2013, actions which were dubbed «*Manif pour tous*» (the demonstration for everybody). There has been a constant resistance since then to each new measure going in that direction, in the name of protecting children, a theme which reemerges today as «protect our children against the evil vaccine».

### **NP - What has been the position of the unions and the left in general on this movement?**

**John Barzman** - As I mentioned earlier, all parties of the left voted against the «sanitary pass» in Parliament. Their arguments were that it was decided without consultation of opposition parties and social forces, it was counterproductive, inapplicable, resorting to repression instead of persuasion, in line with the authoritarian measures against social movements (law on security) and democratic rights. But none took any action ; their candidates or potential candidates for presidential contender or for leader of a united left-green opposition in the subsequent legislative elections, all feared alienating some key voters. Mélenchon tried to straddle the fence but his statements were attacked either by the pro-vaccine establishment or by the anti-vaccine street bullies.

The trade union federations, CGT, CFDT, FO, FSU, SUD, also did not approve the pass, but took almost no action against it. Some rank-and-file militants joined the anti-pass movement individually. Sometimes they were able to win the approval of local trade unions in some cities or sectors (health, education, transit). This exercised pressure on the confederations which seem to believe they had better not alienate militants or potential voters in the forthcoming union elections (2022 also), adding to their paralysis. They have united (except for the CFDT) in calling for a major united mobilization and strike on October 5 around a number of social issues (wage levels, pensions, unemployment compensation, democratic rights). It remains to be seen whether this will be the beginning of a series of actions which marginalizes the anti-pass protest.

### **NP - What is the group Ensemble that you work with? What is it's position?**

**John Barzman** Ensemble! is an organization founded in 2013 to be the third pole in the Front de Gauche alliance of Mélenchon (Parti de Gauche), the PCF and others. It regrouped various tendencies coming from the Revolutionary Communist League - New Anti-Capitalist Party (LCR-NPA), self-management left (ex-Unified Socialist Party, PSU, members) and solidarity movements (ATTAC). It experienced a crisis in 2017 when Mélenchon broke with the PCF and Front de Gauche. Two public tendencies emerged from Ensemble!, the one joining France Insoumise and calling itself Ensemble Insoumis and the other remaining independent and working with France Insoumise as well as other movements (left greens, PCF dissidents, grassroots organizations). These two tendencies were able to preserve certain common structures of Ensemble!

From the beginning of the pandemic, Ensemble! organized a COVID group to analyse the issues, make periodic statements, and encourage initiatives. Both wings of Ensemble! participated. As it were, Ensemble! included renowned researchers, public hospital directors, as well as experienced trade unionists in the health sector (SUD and CGT), as well as elected officials experienced with health issues and many rank-and-file health workers.

This group immediately chose to disprove the arguments of the conspiracy theorists against vaccination in general, or against the breakthroughs in anti-COVID vaccinations. It put forward slogans such as (but not precisely):

- generalize vaccination with public services easily accessible in neighborhoods and workplaces
- against the sanitary pass; due process for employees threatened with punitive measures for not presenting the pass or not being vaccinated
- eliminate industrial patents for vaccines! create a public pharmaceutical industry! solidarity with poor countries unable to obtain the vaccine
- for a broad public health policy increasing proximity services, public hospitals, health training, wages and working conditions of health workers, for European and international coordination of public health policies
- the struggle for public health is part of the struggle for social progress and the environment: improve public education, public health, pensions, wages, democratic rights.

Some debate existed on whether employees subject to disciplinary measures should be supported by defending due process, or should also be vigorously encouraged to get vaccinated.

### **NP - Where do you see all of this going?**

I am not optimistic. The fragmentation of the left has led to an almost certain second-round dual between Macron and Le Pen in 2022, with grave implications for the future of an explicitly left mass movement in France (the specter of Italy—where the left has been practically eradicated—is present). It has also weakened the left's ability to take initiatives on the social front: national strikes, days of action, junction with non-union movements such as the Gilets Jaunes under pro-union conditions.

Perhaps the increased influence of the confusionist, conspiracy movements and far-right parties and action groups, will provoke a more vigorous search for different forms of united action in defense of democratic rights and social justice. Something like the anti-fascist movement of the 1930s. There is also a need for constant exchange between anti-neoliberal groups in a sort of federation, and a pole of clear-sighted activists inspired by past experience and active in grassroots movements. There are unfortunately no clear signs of this happening on a sufficiently large scale. Of course, there is always the hope of sudden large events and a rapid maturation of class-consciousness; but after forty years of retreat and defeat, that «rapid maturation» will have a long road to travel before constructing a movement capable of radically changing the system in the near future. Before the unforeseen May 1968 social explosion, there were signs in 1967 which experienced militant observers had detected, and which do not exist today.

Of course, I think that those who project a just-over-the-edge electoral victory of the left (Melechon, Green or Socialist) against a divided right and far-right as the solution, are heading for disillusionment as the state apparatus will resist and the social movement will not suddenly unfold its powerful wings. Likewise, those who exaggerate the consciousness, or potential consciousness of the existing Gilets Jaunes and anti-pass movements, and predict an explosion of anger that will discredit the winner of the French 2022 presidential elections, and pave the way for the election of radical reconstructionists ( who want a Constituent Assembly to found a new government) in the ensuing legislative elections, have little evidence to bolster their argument. Nevertheless, I remain optimistic that a new left can emerge.