

The French Yellow Vests: A Self-Mobilized Mass Movement with Insurrectionist Overtones

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The White-Hot Anger of French Working People as a Real Fact

After rumbling on social media for weeks, the Yellow Vests (Gilets Jaunes) movement emerged suddenly on November 17, when no less than 300,000 protestors occupied roads, traffic circles in exurbs and rural areas. They wore the yellow safety vests the government requires all motorists to purchase, and which immediately became the emblem of the movement. That week and the next, Yellow Vests also ventured into the heart of Paris, blocking the gilded Boulevard Champs-Élysées and almost reaching the nearby presidential palace. From the beginning, women were unusually prominent in the local occupations and the street marches. At the same time, the Yellow Vests chased away many politicians who visited their protest sites, including some from the left.

On November 17 and over the next several weeks of mass outpouring, the protesting crowds had to face typical French regime police brutality, whereupon they set up barricades on the Champs-Élysées and attacked the Arc de Triomphe and luxury shops. Slogans scrawled on walls and shouted in the crowds included calls for the immediate resignation of neoliberal President Emmanuel Macron, “Topple the Bourgeoisie,” and, in a reference harking all the way back to the Great Revolution of 1789, “We Cut Off Heads for Less Than This” (Alissa J. Rubin, “French Protestors Chide Macron,” *New York Times* 12/3/18).

But alongside this white-hot anger stood not the nihilism of pure destructiveness, but heartfelt aspirations for a more human future, what in dialectical terms is called the positive in the negative. As the Yellow Vests of Saint-Nazaire declared in November: “Our objective is not to destroy, but, quite the contrary, to build a more human world for us and future generations... The solution is in ourselves, workers, unemployed, pensioners of all origins and all colors” (*Gilets Jaunes: Des clés pour comprendre*).

Not since the near revolution of 1968 has France — or any of the so-called Western capitalist countries — witnessed anything like this, a massive, spontaneous, nationwide series of militant demonstrations that not only gained majority support, but also managed to block some crucial parts of the economy like oil refineries, putting the entire government on the defensive. As one far left commentary put it, “a scent of revolution was hanging in the air” (“Une situation excellente?” *Plateforme d’Enquêtes Militantes* 12/6/18). At the same time, it should be noted that 1968 was immensely larger, involving multiple sectors of society, and, with a smaller population than now, ten million workers on strike and nearly all major economic and educational institutions occupied by workers or students. Nor should we forget the Black and Latinx ghetto uprisings in the US in the

1960s and after, or similar ones in France and the UK in recent years by impoverished people of color. Still, the Yellow Vest movement is the first time since 1968 that a mass insurrectionary movement has burst out in a developed capitalist country that was based primarily in the white majority, let alone those in rural and semi-rural areas.

The French government, visibly shaken, was forced to give ground. Despite promising in regal style in both his 2017 campaign and afterwards never to cede to street pressure, Macron was forced to back down partially and accede to a few of the protestors' demands.

(The contagion crossed France's borders too. Belgium experienced mass strikes by newly militant workers against austerity policies, while the iron dictatorship of Egypt's General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi rushed to ban the sale of yellow vests as a precaution.)

The precipitating grievance of the Yellow Vest movement was a planned hike in the gasoline tax for 2019, which would have hit especially hard the working poor and lower middle classes outside the major urban centers. These sectors of the population are increasingly dependent upon their automobiles to get to work and accomplish other life activities in an economy that is growing more and more delocalized. Meanwhile, the centralized state apparatus has concentrated its public transport initiatives on flashy high-speed rail between major urban centers while allowing local bus and train lines to deteriorate.

Initially, the government and the international media presented the protest as one pitting the economic grievances of some rural people against the Macron government's overly high-minded ecological aim of discouraging automobile use. This slanderous narrative only enraged the Yellow Vests further, as well as the majority of the French people, especially the fact that Macron has been widely decried as "the president of the rich." At the same time that he raised the gas tax, his ISF tax cut for the very wealthy meant that "the 100 richest people in the country received the equivalent of a million euros (\$1.14 million) each in tax reduction" (Paul Elek, "The Popular Volcano Is Back!", *Transform! Europe* 12-8-18). Or as Marxist environmentalist Andreas Malm put it: "If anyone needed another lesson in how not to mitigate climate change, they can thank Emmanuel Macron. Scrap taxes on the richest, then slap higher taxes on fuels... Capitalist climate governance... always makes sure any actual burdens end up on the shoulders of the poor" ("A Lesson in How Not to Mitigate Climate Change," *Verso Blog* 12-7-18).

The Movement's List of Grievances and Its Socio-Political Character

By November 29, a number of other "directives of the people" had been sent to the government, going far beyond repeal of the gas tax. Many of these demands exhibited a working class or leftist bent, including, (1) repeal the ISF tax reduction on the rich, (2) raise the minimum wage, (3) more secure retirement benefits for all, (4) peg the salaries of elected representatives to the median national income, (5) good treatment for asylum seekers, (6) jobs for the unemployed, (7) class sizes no higher than 25 from nursery school through the twelfth grade, (8) full retirement at 60, and at 55 for those performing heavy physical labor, (9) concentrate housing and promote rail transport of goods for ecological reasons, (10) stop the closures of local train lines, post offices, and schools. Other demands were of a more protectionist or nationalist nature: (1) big chains like MacDonalD's or Google to pay higher taxes, small shops or artisans less, (2) protection for French industry, (3) forbid the sale of national assets like dams and airports (4) send asylum seekers home whose cases have been rejected, (5) better integration of all those living in France, who should become French by learning the French language and the country's history (Robert Duguet, "Les Cahiers de Doléances," in *Gilets Jaunes: Des clés pour comprendre*, Paris, Éditions Syllepse, December 2018).

To be sure, it is wrong to view the Yellow Vests as a conservative movement concerned only about

high taxes and indifferent to the environment, especially since they moved to the left in the weeks after they burst onto scene on November 17. But it is equally wrong to highlight solely the most progressive elements of their demands and other articulations.

The most concerning Yellow Vest demands are those about sending back rejected asylees and about becoming “French,” each of which have some racist overtones. This is hardly surprising in a country that gave neofascist Marine Le Pen 34% of the vote in the 2017 national elections, with even higher levels in many rural areas. As Cédric Durand notes, “In this movement one finds cohabiting, amid great confusion, sentiments from the left and sentiments from the right, a large mass of people with little political experience, with anticapitalist activists and fascists” (“Le fond de l’air est jaune,” *Contretemps: Revue de Critique Communiste* 12-11-1. I will be quoting extensively from writers on the French. and global, in order to give a flavor of a debate that is still ongoing over the nature and meaning of the Yellow Vest movement.)

Or as the far-left Plateforme d’Enquêtes Militantes observed, during the December 8 protests in Paris, “New slogans appeared, like ‘Paris/Bourgeois/Submit,’ ‘Don’t Turn Out Migrants, Turn Over the Money to Us,’ and even the [singing of] the Internationale,” but at the same time some slogans were more ambiguous or possibly rightwing in nature. The Plateforme article also mentioned the “work carried out over the past four weeks by antifascist groups responsible for expelling the most openly far right groups from the marches.” This article also pointed to “the significant presence of youth from the suburbs in the riots,” a reference to the impoverished peripheries of Paris with large Black and Arab populations (“Macron ne lâche rien, le gilets jaunes non plus!” 12-13-18).

A November 28 declaration from the anti-racist, anti-police-murder Adama Committee, “The Popular Neighborhoods Alongside the Yellow Vests,” stated: “The popular neighborhoods are facing the same social problems as rural or exurban areas... affected by the hyper-[neo]liberal policies of Macron.... It also takes us several hours by car to get to work... plus we face 40% unemployment in some neighborhoods.... Racism, daily humiliations and police violence are added to these social inequalities. This [police] violence is also being experienced by the Yellow Vests today.... We are not ceding the ground to the far right, and we reaffirm our position against racism inside the Yellow Vests movement.... We call upon all residents of the popular neighborhoods to come out in massive numbers to fight for their dignity on December 1” (*Gilets Jaunes: Des clés pour comprendre*).

Despite some contradictions, the overall thrust of the Yellow Vests movement has been a progressive one: against neoliberalism, against economic inequality, against the centralized French state, and for grassroots democracy. Moreover, it has emerged outside the urban centers, in the very parts of France where the neofascists have been drawing much of their support. Let us look more at its social composition.

The Danger of Lassalleanism

The social strata that self-mobilized as the Yellow Vests were not typical leftwing constituencies, at least in the eyes of the dominant parts of the global left. More rural, more self-employed or working in small enterprises, they could be too easily dismissed as “petty bourgeois” by orthodox Marxists, who see them as the mass base of reaction and fascism.

This is a distorted perspective whose roots go back to Ferdinand Lassalle’s German socialist movement, a rival tendency to that of Marx, but which became an important founding influence on the Second (Socialist) International. Lassalleans infamously regarded all forces outside the industrial working class as “one reactionary mass.” To Marx, this was a distortion of the *Communist Manifesto*, where he and Engels had declared: “Of all the classes that stand face-to-face with the bourgeoisie today, the proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class.” However, Marx and Engels

did not mean by that a dismissal of the revolutionary potential of other non-ruling classes. Marx therefore retorted, in his *Critique of the Gotha Program*: “Has one proclaimed to the artisan, small manufacturers, etc., and peasants during the last elections: Relative to us, you, together with the bourgeoisie and feudal lords, form one reactionary mass?” (Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program*, 1875, Ch. 1.)

Lassalleanism forms a major part of the intellectual origin of the class-reductionist “workerism” one finds even today in some varieties of Trotskyism. It is also tied to how a large number of US liberals declare either that the rural areas can be written off due to demographic change (optimists) or that these areas will continue to control the Senate and thus drag the government permanently to the right despite the popular vote (pessimists). But as the Yellow Vests movement shows dramatically, rural areas have never been monolithic, as rural people also suffer under the weight of capitalism, whether in its monopoly stage a century ago (bringing about the leftwing U.S. Populists) or in its neoliberal stage today (bringing about the Yellow Vests).

Moreover, if one is thinking about a real social revolution as opposed to electoral politics alone, or about fascist coups as a real possibility even in longstanding democratic republics, one has also to think about how the hard core of the state, the military-police apparatus, could be overcome. In that case, one has to consider that in most societies, the bulk of the military comes from the more rural areas and that on numerous occasions, from the Paris Commune of 1871 to the Chinese democratic uprisings of 1989, troops from outlying rural areas were sent in to crush the movement. They were able to do so in large part because the revolutionary movement had not succeeded in spreading outward to those rural areas, something Marx pointed out after 1871 with regard to France’s Paris Commune. Had that not been the case, those troops would more easily have gone over to the side of the revolutionaries, as occurred in Russia in 1917. In countries like the US today, an attempted fascist coup seems nearer than social revolution. But that is all the more reason to consider how the left needs to go outside the urban centers, to interact with and win over those sectors of the population whose sons and daughters join the military in such large numbers.

This is not to deny the fact that downwardly mobile lower middle class (petty bourgeois) groups and rural populations drawn from the dominant ethnic groups (not of course members of oppressed minority groups like rural Blacks in the U.S. or Kurds in the Middle East) have at times formed the social base of rightwing populism and fascism, as theorists like Leon Trotsky and Erich Fromm have shown. But such positioning is a product also of the state of the formation of revolutionary ideas and subjectivities at specific historical junctures, something that we as revolutionary leftists cannot control but that we are in a position to influence and help to shape.

The Social Composition of the Movement

What does it mean to say, in the context of France and other industrially developed capitalist countries today, that the Yellow Vests are more rural, more middle class, and more white than other recent radical movements? As the Plateforme d’Enquêtes Militantes notes: “First of all, the social composition of the movement. This novel uprising is characterized by downwardly mobile middle classes and social strata undergoing proletarianization. Certainly, the familiar strata of public and civil servants, service workers, wage earners from the industrial basins, and students are present. But a whole host of other social segments struggling to make ends meet seems to be at the forefront of the dynamic: employees of small and medium enterprises, shopkeepers, artisans, and the growing plethora of new forms of independent and precarious labor. The unity of this social diversity, beyond the rejection of Macron and his centrist politics (politics coming from right or left, it doesn’t really matter), lies in a generalized feeling of having had enough [*ras-le-bol*], anchored in the materiality of living conditions. The violence of downward mobility for some, the harshness of work for others; those who see their social rights crumbling or those who never really had these rights; those for

whom the future suddenly appears to be much darker than they had expected, and those who grew up with a receding horizon of expectations" (*"On a Ridgeline: Notes on the 'Yellow Vests' Movement," Viewpoint Magazine 12-6-18*).

Another new aspect, seldom remarked upon, is the large presence of women among the Yellow Vests: "Women are also at the traffic circles and blockades, at the leading edge of the demonstrations, and are acting as spokespersons. Visible on TV screens, they give the movement an unaccustomed image, since it is too often the men who do the speaking during social movements. First victims of precarity, of unemployment, and involuntary part-time hours, the women in yellow vests are denouncing the social conditions imposed upon them. They are a vital force in the movement" (*"Nous sommes le peuple," Gilets Jaunes: Des clés pour comprendre*).

Rural sociologist Benoît Coquard amplifies this point: "In terms of gender there has been something remarkable in my view: There were almost as many women as men even though, as is typical, especially in rural areas, it is the men who assume public functions. I would even say that the women took the initiative in creating the public gatherings. Many times, I observed here the divorced single mother eking out a precarious existence or the young single woman" (*"Qui sont et que veulent les 'gilets jaunes'?"* interview in *Contretemps 11/23/18*).

The mainstream media obscured this fact, but women were also hit by brutal police repression, As the philosopher Frédéric Lordon intoned: "Whereas France Info had fed us to the point of nausea with images of the Necker hospital windows and a burning McDonalds, no midday news flashes last Monday [3 December] had yet informed us of the death of a woman in her eighties killed by a tear gas canister" (*"End of the World?," Verso Blog, Dec. 7, 2018*).

One also has to think about how the working class has changed over the decades of neoliberal capitalism. As Jean-François Cabral notes, the working class of 1968 with its giant factories and powerful trade unions no longer exists in the same form, certainly not in France and other industrially developed countries: "The reality has become more complex. Former proletarians have become self-employed entrepreneurs alongside small business owners who have to get their hands dirty? Is this really a problem?" (*"Des gilets rouges aux gilets jaunes: la classe ouvrière introuvable?" Gilets Jaunes: Des clés pour comprendre*).

These are problems that go far beyond France, but what is notable about the Yellow Vests is the emergence of a movement against concentrated wealth and for its redistribution, as well as a host of other progressive demands, in a country that was worried in 2017 about a neofascist electoral victory and where both racism, anti-immigrant sentiment, and sexism exist at significantly high levels. To be sure, the Yellow Vests are not an anticapitalist movement, but they seem to offer some real possibilities for a mass left that would embrace all working people, regardless of race, gender, or geography.

Comparisons and Contexts

How can we contextualize the Yellow Vests in terms of recent popular uprisings and movements around the world?

Several commentators have linked the basically leaderless, spontaneous Yellow Vest protests to those since the Arab Revolutions of 2010-11, when the Tunisian and Egyptian masses toppled their autocrats. These in turn inspired Occupy, the Spanish Indignados and other similar movements outside the Middle East. Chiding those who still think of radical movements solely in top-down terms, the anarchist David Graeber writes, in light of the sudden emergence of the Yellow Vests, of "horizontality" replacing "older 'vertical' or vanguardist models of organization." He adds that

“intellectuals” need to do “a little less talking and a lot more listening” in relation to these new movements (“The ‘Yellow Vests’ Show How Much the Ground Moves Under Our Feet,” *Brave New Europe*, Dec. 11, 2018). It is certainly true that many revolutionary movements, from the storming of the Bastille in 1789 to those that pushed out several Arab tyrants in 2011, have been leaderless and horizontal.

But Graeber’s argument has two major limitations. (1) He is still addressing the left, giving it lessons, not dialoguing with the actual movements, as seen in the fact that he doesn’t quote a single slogan or voice from the French protests, or any other one for that matter. Contrast that to our Marxist-Humanist tradition, which has published classics like Charles Denby’s *Indignant Heart: A Black Worker’s Journal*, recording the words of those from the deepest layers of the oppressed, and where mass upheaval from below is not only described and celebrated, but also analyzed critically. (2) More crucially, Graeber is at such pains to deny the charge that the Yellow Vests are nihilistic or reactionary, that he simply celebrates them, without raising the kinds of critical questions that intellectuals, theorists, and members of radical organizations need to do if they are to truly support such movements. For example, Tahrir Square was a magnificent example of horizontal revolutionary subjectivity, but at the same time, the genuinely revolutionary elements did not have a chance to build up their organizations or to develop a really clear-headed theoretical perspective. This resulted in their oscillation between, on one hand, allying with the conservative Muslim Brotherhood, or on the other, with the nationalist but authoritarian military (Gilbert Achcar, *Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab Uprising*, Stanford University Press, 2016). This does not mean that Graeber is wrong, however, to view the Yellow Vests as part of the revolutionary tradition that began in 2011, and in which he played such a crucial part at Occupy Wall Street.

A second context for the Yellow Vests has not been noticed very much, the link to several other rural uprisings against economic oppression over the past year. In Oklahoma and West Virginia, US teachers staged militant and massive strikes last spring, managing to win some significant victories. Women were in the forefront of many of these strikes, which targeted pay so low that teachers had to take second jobs to survive. For their part, the teachers’ unions were more dragged along by events than in the position of leading these strikes. The fact that teacher militancy broke out most massively in these predominantly rural states that had voted overwhelming for Trump showed that those areas had radical possibilities beyond the imagination of leftists and liberals still under the spell of the Lassallean paradigm discussed above. As education researcher Lois Weiner concludes, “the teachers’ movements are laying the ground work for a new labor movement in the South” (“Walkouts Teach U.S. Labor a New Grammar for Struggle,” *New Politics* 65, Summer 2018).

A less discussed but even more apt analogue to the Yellow Vests can be found in the Iranian protests and riots in rural areas last winter. In late December 2017 and into January 2018 a series of violent uprisings occurred in 80 small cities and rural areas that had been thought to have been the political base of the Islamist regime. As an anonymous correspondent from inside Iran wrote at the time: “The protests expanded horizontally, covering most cities in northern, southern, and western parts of Iran. Small cities and places farther from the center, which before this movement were government strongholds, are rioting. It was amazing to see how large numbers of people in small cities of western Iran, who were not active in political crises in the past, came into the streets. In these cities the time between peaceful street protest to taking over the government centers and putting them on fire was very short” (An Iranian Marxist, “Iran Uprising after Five Days,” *International Marxist-Humanist* 1-3-18 — see also the articles on this site that month by Mansoor M, Ali Kiani, and Ali Reza). As in France, areas of the country often dubbed “reactionary” came to the forefront of protests that were mainly over economic grievances: declining or unpaid wages, unemployment, corruption and favoritism, and ecologically disastrous mismanagement of their water supply. While women’s rights was not an explicit issue in the protests and riots, some significant

women's demonstrations against the veil occurred during the same period. Many of the urban residents who had supported earlier protests against the regime were stunned, and even suspicious, hanging back from supporting the new upsurges in the rural areas.

The Yellow Vests movement also has a particularly French resonance, sometimes with nationalist overtones. Recall though, that this is a country whose modern republican system was founded through one of history's great social revolutions, that of 1789. That revolution paved the way for both a modern democratic system that allows labor and socialist groups to organize and also a new form of class society, capitalism, with all its exploitation and oppression. Recall also that that "republican" heritage — especially the tricolor flag and the "Marseillaise" national anthem — has at least since the Russian revolution of 1917 been used more by the center and the right than the left, which has carried the red flag and sung the "Internationale." In addition, the left has — for good reason — eschewed for the most part the language of "the people" in favor of that of the "working class" or "popular classes." Thus, it was a bit jarring for the French left to witness protests against the rich and against deteriorating economic conditions accompanied by the singing of the "Marseillaise," the waving of the tricolor, and references to the French "people," especially when those same protests called for revolution and sometimes even the guillotine. Often, the modern left has also tended to regard locally based anti-tax movements with suspicion.

But as historian Gérard Noiriel informs us, local resistance to the state by peasants and other popular classes had a long tradition in the centuries preceding 1789. In many cases that resistance took the form of opposition to royal taxes: "Struggles against taxation have played an extremely important role in a French popular history," i.e., the struggles of the pre-revolutionary French popular classes, for example, peasants and artisans. For many years, this was subsumed under labor and socialist movements that supported a stronger state and that channeled class anger in a reformist direction ("Gilets jaunes et les 'leçons de l'histoire,'" in *Gilets Jaunes: Des clés pour comprendre*; see also Richard Greeman, "Self-Organized Yellow Vest Protest Movement Exposes Inequality and Hollowness of French Regime," *New Politics Online* 12-3-18).

Rather than jump to conclusions, these are issues to consider and debate, given the changed world of neoliberal capitalism and, more recently, burgeoning rightwing populism and neofascism in the U.S., France, Italy, Germany, Hungary, and elsewhere.

Today, when Marxist and socialist discourse no longer dominates French intellectual life or plays major part in public discourse, and has even less influence outside the urban centers, is it surprising that a social movement of the 2010s has adopted (and adapted) the narratives that citizens receive in the public schools, which still cover the revolutionary origins of the republic.

That in no way makes the Yellow Vests a reactionary movement, as can be seen by its social content and context. Instead, it is a movement that expresses a type of revolutionary anger and energy that could really shake up the country, while at the same time it, like many other social forces today, faces the danger of seduction by the far right.

One issue of concern to the Yellow Vest movement is that the problem is not ultimately Macron or even neoliberalism, but capitalism itself. This is a system that for some decades now has been unable to raise or even maintain the standard of living that the masses achieved, in part through their own labor and social struggles, in the years 1945-75. But in this regard, left spokespersons like Jean-Luc Mélenchon of France Unbowed (or Bernie Sanders in the US or Jeremy Corbyn in the UK) offer no real solutions either, except the mirage of a return to Keynesian welfare capitalism.

If the Yellow Vests have achieved anything, it is to expose Macron as a last holdout of neoliberalism, of a type of "free market" liberalism that rejects nationalism à la Trump and believes strongly in the

European Union.

Whether a truly revolutionary movement, based on solid theoretical ground, can arise in France or elsewhere remains the question.

But the Yellow Vests have at least opened a breach, showing to themselves, the French people, and the world, that mass self-activity by working people is not only the most powerful weapon we have had historically, but that this weapon remains in stock, sharp as a knife, and ready to strike. The question is, in what direction and toward what ends?