

Social Resistance to the Health Pass

November 30, 2021



[Editor's note: We continue discussion of this vital controversy and invite other contributions. The editorial board has taken no position on these questions beyond encouraging debate.]

To comrade Dan La Botz and to the editorial staff of New Politics

Dear friends,

We are writing to you these few words about the way in which the current French situation is presented in your journal. In addition to the article we sent you this summer, you published an interview with Comrade John Barzman, from Le Havre, which was obviously intended to contradict our analysis of the French situation. This debate is legitimate and necessary, but the Barzman interview contains two errors, or inaccuracies, which will distort your readers' perception of the French situation.

1. Barzman writes that the "police unions" played an important role in the massive demonstrations that took place in more than 200 French cities during the summer holidays — while mentioning only one other previous political event, the police demonstration of May 19 — suggesting a rapprochement between police and protesters. And he affirms that there was, in the anti-pass demonstrations, an "unnatural alliance of Gilets Jaunes (Yellow Vests) ... and the police," embodied in the slogan "Freedom."

Barzman's readers, especially Americans, will get the impression that there is a certain political kinship between the police demonstration of May 19 and the anti-pass demonstrations, and that there are connections between the organizers of these demonstrations and police agencies of the far right. These are serious fabrications. In fact, the leaders of the official left (Socialist, Communist, and Green parties) supported the scandalous police demonstration of May 19 organized by the far right, and they condemned anti-pass demonstrations and often treated them as fascist. Moreover, no connection or contact between Yellow Vests and police organizations within the framework of these protests has been reported or denounced anywhere in France. In fact, John Barzman's *New Politics* article is the only place we know of where such allegations are found.

On the other hand, J. Barzman writes that health personnel were required, “beginning on September 15, to verify vaccination or alternatively a recent negative test.” NO, this is wrong: even when they test themselves, which they do, unvaccinated staff are liable to suspension without pay!

Altogether, these inaccuracies can lead American readers to believe that in France, health workers are anti-vax and even anti-test, and that anti-pass demonstrations are linked to the police and to the far right, even though they have often been repressed by the police, and even though anti-pass demonstrators, especially in Paris, have distinguished themselves from far-right groups and worked with Yellow Vests and trade unionists — important facts about which this article does not say a word.

The discussion is necessary but it must be based on facts. It is wrong that a negative test allowed health professionals to keep their jobs, because they tested themselves massively, and it is wrong that the Yellow Vests in the anti-pass demonstrations were complicit with police officials. American readers should know that nearly 300,000 workers, and above all working women, are threatened with suspensions of contracts without wages, which would weaken hospitals and shut down services, which are in fact already shutting down.

After Barzman’s article, another article by Christian Mahieux dealt with the day of trade union action (CGT, FO, FSU, Solidaires) on 5 October. He explains the failure of the action — for it was a failure — by saying that the union leadership did not have much to do with it, but that the “militant teams” mismanaged it. We look in vain for the words “Macron” and “sanitary pass” in this article. The day of action of October 5, decided — in reality at the beginning of July — had the function of prohibiting all national inter-union action before October 5, while Macron implemented the so-called health pass and tried to suspend without pay nearly 300,000 workers. And the day of action was a failure, not because the workers are not combative, on the contrary: the real movement of the workers, with a wave of strikes over wages and also with the continuation of the anti-pass demonstrations every Saturday, takes place outside the calls of the national union leadership, without them, and in spite of them.

This article is a good reflection of the ideas of certain left-wing trade union sectors, who have supported (or, as here, are silent about), the attacks carried out by Macron since July 12 under the pretext of health, and who feel they form a kind of militant milieu in solidarity with the national union leadership. This political orientation caused tensions, particularly in the trade union federation Solidaires, which held its congress at the end of September. This congress was boycotted by the union SUD-Industrie, and SUD-Commerce did not participate. These constitute all the Solidarity unions in private companies, and not in the public or para-public sector.

This shows the tensions created in the unions by three months of inaction, maintained on the grounds that there would be an “October 5,” and it forecasts other crises in the unions, which suffer enormously from the refusal of their leaderships to confront Macron.

Today, major social struggles are taking place in Italy, with mass strikes in ports and in logistics against the so-called sanitary pass. What allowed the eruption in Italy of a strike movement against the pass was the refusal of the unions affiliated with the rank-and-file center, COBAS — unlike SUD-Solidaires in France for example — to fall into line with support for the government, for “social dialogue”, and for the pass which threatens six million workers, instead of 300,000 as in France, with dismissal. At the same time, a fascist provocation took place against the CGIL headquarters in Rome at the beginning of October, and the main trade union leaderships, which endorse the Draghi government and support its health pass, called for demonstrations “for democracy” and “for participation,” in an attempt to amalgamate the anti-pass demonstrators and the strikers with the fascists. This failed because, from October 11, the strikers in the ports of Trieste, Genoa, and

Cagliari, also denounced the fascists.

We are talking about Italy here because, if the present Italian situation, which is important for all of Europe, were presented in *New Politics* as the French situation was presented apart from our article, that would mean: not a word on the anti-pass mass strikes, emphasis placed solely on the CGIL's "anti-fascist struggle," silence on its support for the government of national unity by supporting the sanitary pass, amalgamation between the far-right and anti-pass demonstrators. Comrades, this is unacceptable!

When we start either to remain silent or to present workers' movements as reactionary phenomena, there is danger. Of course, national situations differ. We understand very well that in large countries with strong class struggles, where there is hardly any national social legislation, like the United States or even Brazil, employers and reactionaries responded to the pandemic first by denial and the rejection of safety measures, wanting workers to work even if they fall ill. In France or Italy, social legislation has strongly protected workers from the epidemic, despite government failures. Macron and Draghi are not Trump or Bolsonaro, and they use the epidemic differently. On the one hand, they too put workers at risk by weakening the health system through their "reforms." On the other hand, they use the health pretext to attack the labor code and lay off workers. The health pretext serves as a justification for the support of their policies by the left and the union leadership. In France, Macron is pursuing his presidential candidacy and re-election in this affair.

We understand your fight against Trump and the rejection of vaccination and masks all the more because we are of course for vaccination and have carried on and are carrying on the same fight in France. But using it as a pretext to fire or suspend thousands of workers who have regularly tested themselves without pay is not a health measure. Do you seriously imagine that these tens of thousands of nurses, orderlies, housekeepers, who are outraged by what Macron is doing, are followers of QAnon and worshipers of Trump? Come on! No more than the striking Cagliari dockers are "fascists"!

By regarding the massive social resistance to the so-called health pass as a confused, obscurantist movement (but what great social movement does not have its confusions?), a movement compromised with who knows what police agencies, we end up minimizing or condoning repression — and by reinforcing confusion that can only be combated by being with the workers. Other things being equal, let us remember the Stalinist slanders against the workers of Barcelona in 1937. Frankly.

Fraternal greetings.

Adopted Nov. 1, 2021 by the editorial board of *Aplutsoc* (*Aplusoc* is the abbreviation for the collective *Arguments for the Social Struggle*.)

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