

The Two Souls of Aplutsoc

December 1, 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.]

In a letter to Dan La Botz and *New Politics*, dated November 1, 2021, the editorial committee of *Aplutsoc* displays two faces of the group :

- on the one hand it asks for correction of what it considers as two factual errors in my article about the anti-pass movement ;
- on the other hand, it says the alleged misrepresentation leads to supporting repression against dissidents, as the Stalinist slanders of insurgents in Barcelona in 1937, helped their brutal suppression by the bourgeois Spanish Republican state.

Aplutsoc is a small far-left group in France which describes itself as a “political center”. In this reply, I will deal only with the two alleged factual errors and avoid debates about how to assess the “real movement of the masses”, the impending worldwide revolutionary upsurge, the systematic betrayal of the masses by all trade union bureaucrats at all times, the contempt of petty-bourgeois intellectuals for the unwashed unvaccinated masses, and the comparison between the situation in France and Italy. The two specific issues are what I said in my interview on September 16, 2021 about the attitude of various currents of the **police** towards the Saturday demonstrations, and the extent of **punitive** measures against health workers who were not vaccinated.

Briefly first on **punishment of health and other workers**. In my interview, I summarized one of the five demands of a Covid working group as “ - against the sanitary pass; due process for employees threatened with punitive measures for not presenting the pass or not being vaccinated ”. I obviously agree with this. Health workers, many of them women, underpaid, fed up with cuts in hospital staff, overwork during the pandemic and deceitful government statements about the Covid situation, are among the “employees” targeted that need to be defended. The punitive measures foreseen by the government varied over time, between their first announcement and beginning implementation on September 15, and depended on the professions, the extent of contact with the

public, with patients, and the initial reaction of local management and trade unions. The balance sheet of these punitive measures on November 1 is obviously more precise than on September 16.

Aplutsoc seems to project their knowledge of November 1, back to early September, apparently in order to give some weight to their totally unfounded accusation that I display indifference or contempt for the plight of the approximately 25 % of the French population that is still not vaccinated (figures of November 5, 2021). That such contempt exists among some workers and upper middle class layers is undeniable (but it is clearly not the point of view expressed in the interview which calls for defending victims of repression).

The reverse phenomenon also exists among the antivax : many young, educated, culturally active, "free", individualist, restaurant and theater goers assert their contempt for the "credulous masses" that believe the lies of the medical and pharmaceutical establishment and government and submit "like sheep" to the evil vaccination process and pass control. A complicated situation for progressive activists; divisions that make a rapid and impetuous rise of a united protest against the essential policies of capitalism today more difficult.

Second on the attitude of the **police**. The writer of the *Aplutsoc* resolution makes this point a very fundamental aspect of my interview and invents out of whole cloth the statement that "police trade unions played an **important** (my emphasis J.B.) role in the massive demonstrations that took place in over 200 French cities during the summer vacation" (*J. Barzman écrit que les " syndicats de policiers " joueraient un rôle important dans les manifestations massives qui ont eu lieu dans plus de 200 villes françaises pendant les congés de l'été*). In fact, my interview calls attention to the attitude of policemen and police unions as the sixth of seven "currents that caught my attention". My intention was to ask for discussion of this observation by others. *Aplutsoc's* violent rejection of this observation led me to review my initial evidence based on eyewitness impressions and a contextual survey of police movements.

My personal testimony remains. At the August 14 demonstration in Le Havre, I discussed with four people who came as a group, one of whom openly identified himself as a policeman, and the other three who seemed to know in detail and support his arguments. In addition, as we approached the central square, I heard a man on the very loud sound system, who spoke with authority, in a military manner, say something like this (from memory): "I call on the members of the armed forces and of the police who may be assigned to this demonstration to point their weapons to the ground and not use them against their brothers in the demonstrations... Honor and Glory, Honor and Force, long live the police". In fact, no policemen in uniform were visible around the Town Hall (Hôtel de Ville) or around the demonstrators.

This led me to review the context, that is the evolution of police demands in the recent period. After the beating of Gilbert Zecler, a film director of mixed ancestry, by the police on November 27, 2020, Macron promised a reform of police procedures through consultations known as the security "Beauvau" (Beauvau is the square where the Ministry of the Interior is located). In these consultations most police unions (there exists a small minority of progressive police unions linked to the CGT, to SUD or autonomous) put forward demands for increased funding and technical equipment for the police, faster judicial procedures for people arrested by the police, and less citizen oversight of the police. This pressure culminated with the famous May 19, 2021, police demonstration before the National Assembly, supported by almost all parties including of those of the left (except Mélenchon), and rightly denounced by *Aplutsoc* editors. Negotiations between the government and police unions continued, but in a new relationship of forces.

Then after Macron's announcement of the sanitary pass on July 12 and the first demonstrations against it on Saturday July 17, most police unions (notably Alliance) made statements hostile to any

requirement that the police itself be forced to obtain the sanitary pass and asked that the additional work required by control of the pass among the general public be compensated by additional pay, staff and other material concessions. Their arguments were quite close to those of many Saturday demonstrators; although they generally stuck to their very corporatist policy of avoiding overtly political issues, their position was not incompatible with participation by individual members in the rallies, and the demonstrations clearly strengthened their bargaining hand with the government which needed a reliable police force if the anti-pass movement chose to take the path of the Gilets Jaunes.

Remember that the Gilets Jaunes movement had organized undeclared demonstrations and threatened the Elysée Presidential Palace in December 2019. At that time, the government seems to have panicked and immediately granted the police new advantages (notably exemption from the retirement reform), to insure their loyalty. In July and early August 2021, there were very few police attacks on the growing Saturday demonstrations. Sometime around late August and early September, police attacks on demonstrations increased. Then on September 14, Macron spoke at the national police school in Roubaix, announced the end of the Beauvau round, and a number of material concessions to the police. At the same time, the number of vaccinations advanced steadily, labor confederations announced the October 5 demonstrations, and the numbers at the Saturday rallies began to decline. My point is that this contextual analysis of the movement needs to be taken into account.

My statement about the unholy alliance of Gilets Jaunes and the police (“ 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. ”) in no way implied a formal agreement at the top. The Gilets Jaunes remain a disparate movement with no clear central leaders. Alongside a majority interested in social and democratic issues, they include a far right component which admires virility, force, the army, the Nation, glory, honour and other such “values”. The dominant Gilets Jaunes culture prohibits identification with political parties and trade unions, seen as “rotten”, which makes it difficult for leftists to obtain a clear separation from the far right. The fact that one strand of the Gilets Jaunes called one of four separate demonstrations against the pass in Paris on September 24, shows a will to differentiate from the demonstration called by Florian Philippot, leader of the far-right party “ Les Patriotes ”, but it also shows a rejection of the search for a united front which openly accepts the participation of clearly identified trade unions and democratic organizations. The unholy alliance to which I referred was an informal cohabitation and silent mutual support at the local level, for example in Gilets Jaunes meetings open to Reinfocovid and others, or “ informal ” meetings to plan the Saturday demonstrations.

My intention was to goad the more democratic-minded Gilets Jaunes into proposing clear demands against police brutality. This is where my criticism of the abstract slogan “Liberty” as the central organizing theme for the Saturday demonstrations, as opposed to the earlier “Against the sanitary Pass” is relevant. In the precise context of a necessary campaign for massive vaccination, free of charge, the abstract slogan “Liberty” can be interpreted as freedom to refuse vaccination, a step backwards from the earlier slogan which included “Yes to vaccination, No to the Pass” among its supporters.

My interview carefully separates the “broad social and semi-political layers” from “issue-oriented groups and clearly identified ideologies and organizations”. I cite two of the latter : Reinfocovid and Civitas. I do not include the Gilets Jaunes or the headquarters of the Alliance police trade union, which have different dynamics, in that latter category of organized rightists present in the movement. The accusation that I say the movement as a whole, or its Gilet jaune component, is “complicit” or “compromised” with police union organizations is false. It transforms “compatible with”, “sharing common slogans with”, or “influenced by” into an explicit, conscious joint

intervention, which never existed. Here again, a complicated, difficult situation for progressive activists. Here again a misunderstanding by *Aplutsoc* of what I said, perhaps due to an overly rapid reading, perhaps to a desire to construct a straw man, a petty-bourgeois, reformist, intellectual, anti-working-class left, of which I am perhaps the more palatable exponent, that *Aplutsoc* bravely exposes and combats.

I would hope that *Aplutsoc* will in the future stick to informative analysis and exposition of its differences and abstain from overextending and distorting the arguments of those it disagrees with to compare them with the Stalinists in one of their worst moments, Barcelona 1937.