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France

The Yellow Vests Struggle and the French Crisis

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This interview is to be published in Chinese on Borderless website, in Hong Kong.

Au Loog Yu - The French president Macron's wanting to raise the gasoline tax is supposed to be part of the policies of phasing out fossil fuels, right? Should one support an environmental position such as this one?

Pierre Rousset - No. In fact, the increase in the automobile fuel tax in the name of the fight against climate change has brought to light all the hypocrisy of Macron's ecology policy. More and more railway lines are being closed in the logic of private sector profitability. Other public services are cut in many localities (schools, post offices, health centres, administrative offices, etc.). Outside the cities, people are therefore more and more dependent on the car and must make longer journeys.

In general, Macron does the opposite in France of what his speeches at the UN suggest. He pursues policies of privatisation (including in transport) and deregulation. Like Trump, he "liberates" the big companies from environmental regulations. It deprives the public authorities of the means necessary for the implementation of public policy and relies on the market. Its concrete record in the fight against global warming, the defence of biodiversity or regional development planning is pitiful - in France and in the world as well (French transnationals are free to exploit humans and nature). French banks continue to prioritise financing the most polluting energy.

Eco-taxes are rarely effective and often socially unfair [1]. They cannot be the basis of an ecological transition program. In fact, the crisis of yellow vests illustrates how it is not enough "to accompany" taxation through some compensation measures. The policy itself has to be changed in order to take a set of major social and ecological measures.

Saturday, December 8, the yellow vests once again came to Paris and gathered in many other localities. On the same day, "Climate" events were organised throughout France under the motto "Let's change the system, not the climate". The yellow vests uprising has been taken into account, with frequent contact points between "yellows" and "greens". The motto was "Making ends meet and saving the planet, one common fight" - one cannot ignore social misery in the name of climate change (and vice versa); all the more because the poor are the first victims of the global ecological crisis.

Why is there so much anger from a large section of the population? News reports here say that it is because of the growing urban population and the marginalization of the rural one. How far is this true? Are there any other dimensions of this anger as well? Is it connected to anger against what Macron represents? What is the deeper factor behind this protest?

The rise in fuel prices does not have a significant impact on the rich, but it weighs heavily on the monthly budget of modest households. France is one of the countries in the world where the price of fuel is the highest and where the share of taxes (60%) is the largest. The latest rise was the spark that unleashed the movement of yellow vests against the high cost of living, poverty, fiscal and social injustice.

If this spark sets the plain on fire, it is because the social situation is very serious. Let's say that Macron launched the final offensive against the collective rights obtained by labour struggles, especially after the Second World War. The previous governments already restricted and partially dismantled them (the Labor Code, for example, was written to guarantee minimum rights of wage earners, and now must guarantee above all the "competitiveness" of companies).

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The goal is to break down collective resistance, but also to allow private capital to take over what has been in the public sector since 1945 - it represents a huge source of profit!

People realise that we are moving into a world where finance and big business decide everything, with devastating consequences. We had one of the best health systems in the world, a public service. It is being destroyed. Inequalities in health are exploding.

Macron personally embodies this shift. He worked in an international bank, he belongs to the social elite directly attached to the world of business. He has some government experience, but no political experience: he has never been elected until he became president. He is, moreover, unable to hide his class contempt for working people. He declared publicly that there are winners and "those who are nothing". "Illiterates". That it is enough to "cross the street" to find a job, that the unemployed are therefore "loafers". That those who testify on their situation and present demands are always "complaining": "in France, we do not complain". On the other hand, he is full of attention for the powerful and his own relatives and friends. His arrogance is such that he is now hated - while, for example, the previous president, François Hollande, was mocked. The most common motto is "Macron resign".

The uprising of the yellow vests, a socially very composite movement, received immense popular support (70 to 80%) and opened the crisis of Macronism. Macron got only 24% of the votes in the first round of the presidential election. He was elected by a wide margin only because in the second round, his opponent was Marine Le Pen of the National Front (far right). His majority was not "for" him, but "against" the FN and the number of abstentions was very big. He should have taken it into account, but he is incapable of thinking as a head of state. He therefore very brutally implemented his program of social destruction.

How widespread is the protest? What are the main components of the protest? News reports said that it was at first a spontaneous protest? Is this true? Could you elaborate on this?

Initiated by calls on Facebook, the dynamics of the yellow vests quickly became national. They are present throughout France (except, as such, in urban centres). According to the Ministry of the Interior (Home Office), up to 300,000 yellow vests were once mobilised at the same time (there is obviously rotation on the action points). This is a figure comparable to that of recent major social movements if we stick to the same source, the Ministry of the Interior.

At the same time, these are local mobilisations, carried out in permanence - a month of daily initiatives: total barricades or filtering of road traffic, blockage of shopping centres and gas depots, operation "free highways" ... The "ordinary people," who have never campaigned before, and women are strongly represented on the ground. And then, they came to Paris and other big cities, clashing with the police.

I would like to address here three issues.

1. Yellow Vests is to a large extent a local, grassroots movement. Territorial mobilisation is becoming more decisive today. This is where action is organised over time and the bonds of solidarity with the population are woven. More generally, given the precarious wage situation, the capitalist reorganisation of work, deindustrialisation and the accumulated defeats in companies, territorial action (including the territorial strike) has an increasing strategic importance (in fact, even in 1968, there was a "general stoppage of work" dimension in France, in addition to the massive general strike in industries). Unfortunately, the French trade union movement has not for long incorporated this dimension into the heart of its action - and the union leadership is concerned about a movement they cannot control. At last, most of the unions are now calling for actions, including strikes, beginning Friday 14 and continuing on Saturday, the yellow vests global action day.

2. There is a great mistrust toward the parties and unions and the yellow vests want to be independent. There are often very democratic local practices (daily assemblies to decide on the next actions or discuss demands). But it is impossible for them to elect a national representation (and many do not want it). More or less self-proclaimed "figures" declare themselves "representative" (sometimes with some obvious political ambitions), which provokes exasperated reactions on the ground. The government took the opportunity to invite who it wants and claims it cannot answer the yellow vests for lack of interlocutors. There are, however, a number of well-known "flagship" demands (and many more) that it could have quickly responded to if it wanted to.

3. The action of the yellow vests have been nonviolent ... and sometimes violent. One of the achievements of their uprising was to impose a broad public debate on the issue of violence: the terrible but invisible (in the eyes of the elite) social violence suffered by the poor who basically legitimise violence in action (visible) of people who are victims. After the clashes that took place in Paris on December 1, the government launched a very tough ideological counter-offensive to divide the yellow vests or to reduce their support from the population. All the means of the new security laws were implemented in Paris on December 8, after the introduction in these laws of measures which previously fell under the state of emergency: searches and preventive arrests, use of armoured vehicles, massive arrests (more than 1700 on the national scale); numerous and harsh jail condemnations by the courts ...

There are modalities of violence that many yellow vests reject. However, even the most pacifist note that if there had not been violence, the government would have had the opportunity to turn a deaf ear while waiting for the mobilisation to run out of steam...

What is the attitude of the bourgeoisie parties and the left parties, from SP, Mélanchon (France Insoumise), to the NPA?

Given the popularity of the movement, the right-wing opposition seized the opportunity to isolate Macron. Given the current degree of crisis and the call to return to order, it is now much more discreet. The far right holds the pressure. The PS (Socialist Party) remains in ambiguity. France Insoumise (Insubordinate France, LFI) has supported the movement from the beginning and continues. After some initial hesitation (the time to understand what was happening), the PCF (French Communist Party), the NPA (New Anticapitalist Party) and some of the other leftist forces do the same. The bulk of the labour movement has remained at least "distant" ... but it must retake their claims, evoke the "convergences" of struggles and recognise that some unions have joined the yellow vests.

Now that Macron had conceded to certain demands, is the protest receding? We heard from news that high school students are also protesting. What are they protesting against? How big is the mobilisation?

Macron did not concede anything substantial. He remained silent (incredible!) until Monday 10 of December. It is the Minister of the Interior and the Prime Minister who spoke on behalf of the regime. They hoped to calm the game by cancelling for 2019 the increase in the fuel tax, and announcing some other minor measures. Too little, too late. The demands of the yellow vests have grown enormously, sometimes including new elections and constitutional reform (the 6th Republic). Indeed, there is a strong call for democratic reforms, as the introduction of a citizens initiative referendum right (it does exist yet in France). Or against inequalities, i.e. for the legal ceiling on high salaries. There are two major areas: a real rise in purchasing power (including a sharp rise in minimum wages, and the cancellation of the rise of a social contribution levied on pensions) and more social justice (make the rich pay) by reinstating the tax on large fortunes and by taxing the GAFAM (Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple).

The fact that Macron had to speak last Monday is politically significant. He recognised that his words hurt many. He declared a "state of social and economic emergency". He made many vague promises. For now, he announced only four concrete decisions, responding apparently to some of the yellow vests' demands. But all of them concern only segments of the population – and not the poorest (i. e. for pensioners). It is untrue that the minimum legal wage will

be raised by 100 €,-. This amount will be given only to part of the population receiving the minimum wage, through an existing mechanism of bonuses, taken from the state budget. Companies are not concerned by this "rise". Other measures were already planned, but were to be implemented progressively during the coming years.

Macron's class line of march is not changing. Nothing is asked from the rich, the bosses, the shareholders. The measures will be financed by public spending (meaning us). More cuts will probably be done on public services, etc. The public debt will also increase, probably beyond the European Union's legal ceiling (the "social and economic state of emergency" formula also aims at justifying the increase of the French debt before the European Commission).

Are university students supporting the high school students?

The high school movement started before the university students began to move. It is a little early to know how much it will expand. It has immediately been met with very violent repression. High school students are sometimes dragged into court for wanting to hold a general meeting in their high school! One scene was particularly shocking, on video: dozens of high school students on their knees, on the ground, their hands tied behind their backs or placed on their heads, laughed at by policemen. It was, it is true, in a poor neighbourhood high school ... Social stigma, as always.

Injuries caused by the use of tear gas weapons and grenades have become numerous and sometimes grave (to the hands, eyes, feet, chest, head). After the others, the high school students undergo it too. And old women died after been hit by such police dangerous weapons.

What will happen next, for the government, for the protesters, and for the parties. How can this protest affect the 2022 general election?

How will the movement of yellow vests continue? While we have reached a pivotal point (very high level of confrontation on December 1st, unprecedented use by the state of "emergency like" measures on the 8th), the political pressures are becoming very brutal and as Christmas comes... difficult to be sure. But this movement is not a fire of straw. It expresses a very deep social distress. It will continue and rebound, but it may divide. Demonstrations will be organised coming Saturday, but we don't know yet the impact of Macron's intervention.

The political crisis is becoming more intense. We are now hearing about the "twilight of Macronism".

Macron won because both the classical governmental parties were marginalised. The Socialist Party by its antipopular policies under the previous government. The right by the multiplication of financial scandals that affected its candidate. The République en marche (LRM) (Republic on the move; Macronist) is an inorganic movement with little social implantation (its MPs often come from the world of entrepreneurs). French institutions are among the least democratic in Western countries. Macron enjoys exceptional presidential powers and a massive majority in Parliament, even if it is a minority in the country. He can "hold", but not regain his authority.

The next elections (European and local, before the presidential and legislative elections) are a bad omen for the République en marche. The results will depend in particular on the rate of abstention, currently very high. Will one of the next elections be the occasion for a sanction vote, or will abstention increase further? It is likely to be particularly high next year, when the European Parliament is elected.

The problem is deep. It is hard to see how the République en marche, this inorganic movement, could be consolidated in the present circumstances. France Insoumise (LFI) is also a "movement" (a "gaseous" movement,

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Mélenchon said) driven from above, but without a skeleton (there is no formal membership, for example). All this cannot remain in the present state. Depending on the circumstances and events, there may be decomposition, structuring, divisions ...

We are going through a social, political and institutional crisis, the outcome of which is very "open", in a profoundly new situation. It is hard to make predictions. It will depend on struggles that take unforeseen paths, indeed.

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[1] By the way, in this case, only a small part of the fuel "eco-tax" was to finance energy transition.