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France

# Macron and the Gilets jaunes

- IV Online magazine - 2019 - IV537 - October 2019 -

Publication date: Wednesday 2 October 2019

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**“We’re here, we’re here, even if Macron doesn’t want it, we’re here, for the honour of the workers and for a better world.”**

**One of the songs of the *gilets jaunes*.**

The life of a political activist is often made up of periods of routine, but sometimes unforeseen events occur to which we must react. In recent years there has been Occupy Wall Street, the occupations of the squares in Spain, Gezi Park in Istanbul (the popular demonstrations in Egypt and Algeria are on a completely different scale). France has been experiencing since November 2018 a popular movement unprecedented in its national character, its popularity (which goes far beyond those who participate directly in it), its radicality and its social composition: the *gilets jaunes* (Yellow Jackets) which throws a spotlight on the crisis of French society and its political system.

France is in the European Union, and faced with Germany, it is a power weakened by the decrease in its economic importance, primarily that of its industry. The French state has tried to compensate for this by playing on its political and military weight. [1] Since 2010, there have in addition been redoubled efforts to “normalize” the French social model (neoliberal economic and social policy, however, dates from March 1983 when Mitterrand chose “rigour”, breaking with the programme of the Union of the Left which had come to power in May 1981).

Macron was elected president in May 2017, largely as a result of a combination of circumstances. The firmly and openly pro-employer policy of François Hollande completely destabilized the Socialist Party. The candidate of the Right, François Fillon was discredited by his love of money, which led him, in the midst of an election campaign, to be the object of a judicial enquiry. This paved the way for a “little Bonaparte”: Emmanuel Macron who, from the outset, enjoyed strong support in the establishment (employers and high administration) and appeared, in the words of the political scientist Jérôme Sainte-Marie, as the man of the “ideological and social reunification of the bourgeoisie to give the reforms the greatest possible propulsive force”. [2]

## Macron, the man of the “bourgeois bloc”

For a long time, the French bourgeoisie had an internationalized wing, totally committed to the construction of capitalist Europe and a wing more concerned with its territorial base, more dependent on the national state. Moreover, there were also cultural differences between the supporters of Anglo-Saxon modernity and more traditionalist currents linked in particular to Catholicism. [3] The PS, in its degeneration, had ended up embodying in its own way, both the economic liberalism (with from time to time a small “social” strain for its voters) and cultural and societal liberalism. Facing it, the government right was fracturing between “conservatives” and “liberals”. For the French bourgeoisie, in an uncertain international context, these more or less illusory discrepancies are now felt as a loss of energy and time. It is now a question of “hitting hard” with resolution: labour law, SNCF (national rail service), pensions, civil service, minimum wage (SMIC) in due course... everything must go to the mill: “TINA” (there is no alternative) as Margaret Thatcher said. Macron has brought behind him men and women from both the Socialist Party and Republicans (the traditional right), seasoned with a zest of so-called representatives of “civil society”, essentially employers’ lackeys (such as Muriel Penicaud, the Minister of Labour), or personalities who sometimes have a past that is more honourable than the present (like Nicolas Hulot and Daniel Cohn-Bendit). As Amable and Palombarini have written, the social bloc behind Macron brings together the “wealthy categories that are pro-integration and favourable to neoliberal reforms ... beyond the right and the left.”

Macron was immediately hard at work. He succeeded in passing two major reforms, one of which

on labour law, is in line with the Rebsamen and El Khomri laws of the Hollande mandate: the other concerned the railways (status of railway workers, opening to competition); and he has announced two more: on pensions and on unemployment insurance. While announcing his intention to balance the budget, he has granted important tax gifts to corporations and the wealthy, with the elimination of the wealth tax (ISF, reduced to property alone), the introduction of a “flat tax” on capital. He also announced further reductions in corporate income tax and employers’ social contributions. The impact of other reforms supposed to favour those on low and middle incomes (housing tax, social security contributions) has been reduced by the way they are spread out over time. Meanwhile, pensioners’ incomes were affected by the increase in the CSG (generalized social contribution) and the de-indexation of pensions. At the same time, symbolic measures of an unequal policy (decrease of the housing allowance and deindexation of social benefits). All in a context of difficulties and the decline of public services (especially for hospitals) Although the government has denied it, all this appeared to be inspired by the theory of “trickle down” from the rich to the poor, especially as Macron himself was not stingy with laudatory remarks for “those from above” (the “first ones to climb”) and scornful for “those from below” (“the people who are nothing”) and, finally, seemed ignorant of social realities (“cross the street and you will find work”).

The endless Benalla affair and the revelation of the complacency it has received from the President has, since early May 2018, added to the feeling of broad circles of the population vis-à-vis the exercise of power by Macron. [4] But after the victory won over the railwaymen in the first half of 2018, we could think of the beginning of September 2018 that resistance was likely to be on a very low level. In September 2018, the government announced its intention to increase the TICPE (domestic tax on the consumption of energy products) by 11%. This while the price of fuel is already at a high level and the ecological argument put forward by the authorities appears as a pretext: taxes (TICPE and VAT), which constitute 60 per cent of the price of fuels, only partially benefit the energy transition budget.

On 17 November, after preparation and discussions on social networks, the *gilets jaunes* occupied roundabouts, motorway tolls ... throughout the country. That day, more than 3,000 sites were occupied in France, according to the Ministry of the Interior. The same day, in Paris, the ring road was blocked and then demonstrators marched down the Champs-Élysées towards the Elysee (presidential residence) before being blocked by the police. According to official figures, that day 287,000 people mobilized (in fact, there were significantly more). This mobilization continued in the following weeks, throughout France. The protest was organized in a very decentralized and horizontal way on the roundabouts and through demonstrations organized every Saturday. Beyond the direct participants in the movement, opinion polls showed that it benefited from majority support in public opinion, primarily among workers.

## The roots of the movement of *gilets jaunes*

The irruption of the *gilets jaunes* was not foreseen by anyone. This was a spontaneous revolt that escaped the framework of social struggles that we have seen in France over decades. This was first manifested by its two emblems: the *gilet jaune* and the tricolour (French) flag. The yellow vest is both an object that almost everyone has (it is the hi vis jacket mandatory for motorists) and that some wear to carry out their work. If we want to look for historical analogies, we must go further than the 2012-2013 Italian Forconi fork; the yellow jacket, this popular object (in the sense of “the people”) seems to belong to the same register as the *Bundschuh* (a knotted leather shoe worn by farmers), the emblem of German peasants who revolted at the beginning of the fifteenth century. The tricolour flag refers to the memory of the revolution of 1789 which abolished privileges (and which is felt as having been a moment of national unity beyond the trade union and political divergences of today). Beyond the more or less debatable historical analogies, understanding the movement means getting to the root of it: the *gilets jaunes* are the product of the evolution of the French social formation, itself determined by the recent transformations of capitalism.

The waged workforce has undergone different modifications: enlargement and homogenization on the one hand, breaking up and dispersion on the other. The conditions of remuneration and work as well as the relationship of the employers to employees of a broad fraction of technicians and qualified workers in industry and services, indeed a section of management, have become more similar. The advantages conceded in the past to some of these categories have tended to erode. But at the same time there has been a diversification of status: interim, fixed term contracts (contrats à durée déterminée - CDD), outsourcing, external or on-site subcontracting, reduction of the size of establishments in favour of “networks”, variable working hours. In the public services (state employees, “fonctionnaires”) private law contracts and precarity have increased.

The so-called intermediary layers are very sensitive to the developments of capitalism, above all when they accelerate. These categories have been profoundly renewed: a decline of the peasantry, and to a lesser extent artisans and small traders, and a continued rise of the “salaried middle layers”. While new non-salaried categories are developing today, they feel themselves deprived of one of the traditional attributes of this situation: the “independents” have become largely dependent, and often this is not only a feeling but an objective situation. As to the “middle salaried layers” they are divided: if one section blocks ideologically with the big bourgeoisie, their “lower” elements are increasingly conscious of also being victims of capitalist logic.

We should add territorial remodelling to this picture. The big working class concentrations have been partially dislocated and have left the towns while capitalist spatial development, through the increased price of housing, forces many employees to live more or less near the metropolises but not necessarily near to their work: hence the incessant moving from suburb to suburb or from the periphery to the centre (increased further by the evolution of commerce with the development of shopping centres and the decline of neighbourhood shops). For many wage earners, proximity between workplace and life is a thing of the past. Saint-Denis [a major town in the Paris suburbs] was both a place of working-class habitation and of concentration of factories. At the high point of the movement of May-June 1968, the town had 25,000 strikers, 125 enterprises and industries on strike, with at least 70 occupations, and nearly 60 strikes in the public services with 30 occupations. The contrast with the current situation is stark.

The geographical caesura also affects artisans and various small entrepreneurs who have to travel to go to their clients. These developments explain the sensitivity of significant popular sectors to fuel prices: studies on the impact of prices on consumer behaviour show that fuel price increases only marginally impact on the number of car journeys made (because people have no choice in terms of going to work or to get supplies); if there is an impact of oil price variations it is (above all for those on low incomes) on heating (with the increase of energy precarity): as Michel Husson puts it: “when the price of energy goes up, the poor consume as much for their car, and less for heating”. [\[5\]](#) It is then not by chance that the *gilets jaunes* movement began by denouncing the taxes which amplified the increase in fuel prices. The disposable income of French people (measured by the average disposable income calculated by the INSEE (National Statistics Institute) has fallen in recent years – between 2008 and 2016 – most especially for the popular categories. Also, this official indicator of purchasing power should not be fetishized: a study by the IRES (Institute of Social and Economic Research) shows that the cost of typical budgets (a consumer basket allowing a family with children to live decently) drawn up by the UNAF (National Union of Familial Associations) has increased twice as quickly as the INSEE consumer price index over the period 2010-2018. In other words, the cost of a decent life is increasing much more quickly than is indicated by the official price index which forms the basis for the Insee calculation of the evolution of purchasing power.

Also, Macron’s policies, in line with those of his predecessors, saps the legitimacy of the tax system: why pay taxes when the rich pay less and less of them (either thanks to tax reforms, or because without great risk they can practice evasion, indeed pure and simple fraud), while hospitals are full or closed, and post office and rail lines other than the TGV ones are sacrificed? It should be added that, as Alain Bihl stresses, the attacks against public services and social provision are a supplementary wing of the challenge to the employment code, increasing precarity of employees and the pressure on wages: it is about reducing the cost for capital of this collective infrastructure and services, necessary to the reproduction of the labour force (health system, educational and university apparatus and

so on). [6] Under the pretext of reducing a public indebtedness which results above all from fiscal injustice benefitting capital and the wealthy, successive governments have been bent on the downsizing of collective infrastructure and services. This aspect of neoliberalism affects all the popular categories, whether waged or not, and brings them closer together.

The feeling of being unjustly taxed is strongest in the rural and suburban areas where the inhabitants see the public services which represent the local embodiment of their taxes disappear year after year. Whatever one thinks of the basis for it, the government decision to limit road speeds to 80 km/h when it had been 90 km/h was seen in these zones as a supplementary chicanery.

## A heterogeneous movement but a common desire for equality

The *gilets jaunes* are a grouping of heterogeneous social layers which all feel themselves victims of neoliberal brutality and the contempt of the “élite”. The bulk of the movement was formed by active or retired workers, together with elements of the petty bourgeoisie (artisans, the self-employed, private peripatetic nurses), farmers and small employers. We should also note the importance of women, numerous on the roundabouts and demonstrations: a survey cited by the magazine *Causette* estimated the proportion of women among the *gilets jaunes* at 45%; beyond the figure, there is no doubt about the strong and visible presence of women, who have sometimes organized their own demonstrations.

This is not a movement of the heart of the big conurbations or of the popular neighbourhoods (where the population is as we know largely of foreign origin). Even if the difficult “ma king ends meet at the end of the month” are a leitmotif for many *gilets jaunes*, the base of the movement is not the poorest and most marginalized population: those who mobilize are above all those who have a job but cannot live decently from it. If the mobilization is a national phenomenon, some big provincial cities until now presented as models of dynamism, like Bordeaux and Toulouse, have seen especially significant demonstrations in fact broadly made up by their periphery, which has led to some of the more lucid analyses on the type of development of these conurbations which reproduce (of course with certain specificities) the Parisian model of social and economic segregation. As one sociologist explains in relation to Bordeaux: “The policy of renovation pursued by the mayor, Alain Juppé... has had perverse effects. Many have been sent to an increasingly distant periphery. The *gilets jaunes* are also the consequence of this. Today, Bordeaux is a new city, a little Paris. The social differences are thus considerably accentuated.” [7]

The social demands advanced by the *gilets jaunes* have evolved: from the tax on fuels, they have broadened to the reestablishment of the ISF wealth tax, higher pensions, the denunciation of VAT on basic needs products, and the revalorization of the SMIC minimum wage. The climate and ecological question has been used by the government against the *gilets jaunes*, but the latter have often shown that they are not indifferent here (and have participated in marches for the climate) even if they do not accept that “those below” should pay the cost of the necessary transition. On the other hand, the existence of the *gilets jaunes* has led some of the demonstrators on these marches to integrate the importance of a concern for the “end of the month”.

The heart of the demands of the *gilets jaunes* is not the challenging of capitalist exploitation but rather of its consequences, and of the budgetary and fiscal choices of the government. Socially broadly proletarian in their base, the *gilets jaunes* pose by their demands above all as a movement of the “small against the big”, a movement for equality.

The *gilets jaunes* in fact often occupy a heterogeneous place in capitalist relations of production which differentiates

them from employees who still participate in trade union mobilizations: workers in very small or middle sized enterprises (TPE-PME) often ideologically close to “their boss”, independents (nurses, care workers, drivers and so on), small employers, and finally pensioners.

Wages are then far from constituting the priority aspect of the movement but, despite the weight of non-employees, these demands do not at all boil down to the “lowering of charges”. The employees, often trades unionists or former trades unions, who are present in the movement are not there in that capacity as such (and also, even when they are unionized, they are not necessarily ready to participate in mobilizations around demands relating to their workplace). This obscuring of the specific interests of employees in the movement can come down to several factors, including the desire to preserve its unity despite the disparity of the popular categories present. The *gilets jaunes*, indeed, distrust everything that could divide: the priority is the search for consensus, but this has its reverse side in terms of fear of open debates between diverse options. The historian Samuel Hayat, who has made a study of the demands of the *gilets jaunes*, argues that their mobilization is rooted in “the moral economy of the popular classes”, that is, in the moral principles that should govern the functioning of the economy: you should be able to live from your work, everybody should contribute according to their resources, tax frauds should be punished, and so on. [8] Hayat says that Macron has appeared as breaking with this implicit pact, both by the measures taken and by his contemptuous discourse. He specifies that such a revolt, even if it is authentically popular, does not necessarily transform itself into a revolutionary movement: it appears more as a response to a government which has gone too far, and, for example, as Halimi and Rimbart stress, does not challenge the subordination of employees in the workplace nor the basic division of incomes. [9]

With the *gilets jaunes*, the social question has returned to the forefront, as has the democratic question: the demands for the RIC (référéndum d’initiative citoyenne – citizen’s initiative referendum) has increasingly been taken up by the movement. This reflects the crisis of the representative system as it now functions in France: presidentialism, subordination of the legislature to the executive (all the more inasmuch as the parliamentary elections are now organized after the presidential elections), distancing of social reality from political representation (4.6% of deputies are employees and none is a manual worker, whereas these categories represent half of the active population). To this republican monarchy, to this degenerate representative system, the RIC counterposes (with many illusions) a desire for direct democracy.

## Problems of orientation and structuring

To understand the movement, it is necessary to take account of the fact that there are several “circles” of *gilets jaunes*: from the broadest, made up of people who support without participating in the actions and debates (or do so less and less) to the tighter, more militant circle which has continued mobilising for long months. This narrower circle, confronted week after week with police repression, has had to handle the problem of convergence with the others, including the trade unions.

The far right has been involved in the movement from the beginning. This infiltration began very soon after the creation of several Facebook groups on the demands which mixed together pell mell the return to the 90 km/h speed limit on departmental roads, the death penalty for paedophiles, the end of radar and other subjects which were fairly meaningful for a far-right electorate. The executive of the Rassemblement national (RN, the new name of the Front national, the party of Marine Le Pen) decided on 19 November 2018, to support the *gilets jaunes* movement, while keeping a certain distance while “Debout la France”, led by Dupont-Aignan, and various violent fascist groups were involved. Several of the initiators of the first appeals on the social networks and those who had a high media profile at the beginning of the movement were not then without links to the right and far right, but this was not generalized.

The figures who now remain most influential (Priscillia Ludoski, Éric Drouet, Jérôme Rodrigues, Maxime Nicolle

known as “Fly Rider”) have no links with the far right in the first three cases and the same appears to be true of the latter despite a penchant to confusion and conspiracy theory. A part of the popular electoral clientele of the right and of the Rassemblement national is effectively found among the *gilets jaunes* (or in support of the latter) and has influenced their forms of appearance (tricolour flags, the “Marseillaise”) but this presence should not be confused with being led by the organized far right. The latter has attempted to make immigration (with the fantasy of the world pact on immigration proclaimed in Marrakesh in December 2018) an axis of the movement but it has failed, even if racist and anti-Semitic slippages have been noted here and there and have been highlighted by government propaganda (above all in relation the anti-Semitic heckling to which the writer Alain Finkielkraut was subjected). A fraction of the parliamentary right (Les Républicains) was loud in supporting the *gilets jaunes* at the beginning, but subsequently backed off and began to attack the government for its “inability” to maintain order. The Rassemblement national has moderated its favourable discourse in relation to the *gilets jaunes* and expressed its opposition to the increasing of the SMIC. The various fascist groups have tried to play a role (by participating in clashes or by offering themselves as a security service) and have sometimes attacked protesters of the extreme left but they did not weigh on the orientation of the movement, except very occasionally. However, we must not deny that for some participants in the movement there is a diffuse influence, through social networks, of the Soral-Dieudonné movement which mixes anti-Semitism with an anti-system discourse, a reflection of prejudices rooted in society (and which are therefore neither new nor specific to the *gilets jaunes*).

In fact, the *gilets jaunes* have affirmed their desire for independence and this has been manifested by a great distrust of self-proclaimed spokespersons. The personalities who were not rejected by the movement are those who have taken care not to appear to distance themselves from the “rank and file”. The *gilets jaunes* were from the outset a movement with a national dimension but organized first at the local level, participants in groups who take turns on the roundabouts or meet in the localities. The social networks are the vector of the links between groups and make it possible to publicize proposed actions.

The local groups are very heterogeneous in the frequency and modalities of their meetings, especially when the police evacuate the roundabouts and destroy the shelters that were built there. The broadest democracy reigns in some groups, while in others those who “speak the loudest” have a disproportionate weight. The extreme right is more or less present, it is sometimes rejected or sometimes gains a hearing which renders difficult the participation of left or far left activists. In the demonstrations, many things are decided on the ground, the course of the marches often depending on police offensives. The participants, however, are not ready to dissolve at the slightest grenade throwing and, increasingly, come equipped with goggles and masks to resist tear gas. Awareness of the repressive role of the police in the service of the government and the powerful is increasingly shared. The extreme right, very much in the minority in the demonstrations, sometimes tries, as we pointed out above, to attack far left militants, especially in the case of NPA militants in Paris on 26 January.

The concern for national structuring was expressed in the Assembly of Assemblies, which was held for the first time on 27 January at the initiative of Commercy’s *gilets jaunes* group and then from 5-7 April in Saint-Nazaire. These two meetings gave rise to very rich debates and produced calls for a combative and progressive tone. But they attracted only a small minority of the movement and have not palliated the lack of structuring and democratic national debate. The *gilets jaunes* are rightly wary of spokespersons who would confiscate their struggle and speak without a mandate on their behalf, but they could not go as far as establishing a democratic national coordination.

## Radicalism and “violence”

In the French labour movement (including to a large extent the far left), since the 1980s, street demonstrations have been ritualized with marches where everyone parades behind their organization (first unions and “mass” organizations, then the political parties) on routes negotiated with the police and, at least in Paris, generally avoiding

the popular neighbourhoods. Only youth demonstrations have escaped this pattern (as well as those of “autonomous” minority movements). This custom began to be eroded during the movements against the pension counter-reforms of 2003 and 2010 with occupations of railway stations and tracks.

Under the Hollande presidency, things started to change more massively with the appearance of the “lead contingent” in demonstrations during the fight against the employment law, that is to say a significant number of protesters not seeing why they should march behind the march stewards and the trade union leaders. Either because they did not identify with these organizations (whose influence has diminished), or because while belonging to these organizations, they did not see why they should wait until the “leaders” decide how they should demonstrate. At the same time, under the cover of the constraints of the fight against terrorism, there has been a hardening of the attitude of the police; police who aim more specifically (with teargas or sting-ball grenades, batons and arrests) at the head of the march, while a large part of those who participate do not particularly want to break windows or confront the police. However, the refusal of the government to compromise on its law and police violence has led to a more or less “positive” understanding of the “autonomous” initiatives.

All of this was amplified with Macron during the movement against the second law of dismantling of the employment code and against a government widely perceived as contemptuous and in the service of the “ultra-rich”. With the *gilets jaunes*, an additional degree has been crossed in the use of the police to try to settle political and social questions. They were immediately located outside the usual routine of the demonstrations: if they do not pose the problem of a strike movement, they want their demonstrations to have a concrete impact, hence the presence on the roundabouts (in order to be seen and slow down traffic), highway tolls and Saturday demonstrations on roads not negotiated with the police. Hence also the desire to gather and protest where the rich and powerful, the luxury shops, are: in Paris on the Champs-Élysées and as close as possible to the Élysée, in the uptown shopping streets, near the town halls and prefectures in the provincial cities. The refusal of the government to accept this and the contempt shown for their demands could only exasperate the demonstrators (and increase the understanding of those who resisted the police or attacked symbols of power and money).

On Saturday, 1 December the protesters, despite the police, managed to get close to the Élysée, so on 8 December resources (helicopters and so on) were put in place to evacuate the president if necessary. Also, on 1 December, the prefecture of Puy-en-Velay had been burned and the airports at Nantes and Nice blocked. From there, the government put in place a two-pronged strategy: to pretend to want dialogue and to satisfy some of the demands of the movement and to use repression unreservedly. It's the second point we will discuss here (the first will be discussed later).

Since the death of Malik Oussekin (who was killed in a student demonstration in 1986), the police had been instructed to show restraint on city centre demonstrations, unlike the repressive and violent methods used in popular suburbs. Against the *gilets jaunes*, police and judicial repression has been more fierce than in May 1968 (except, with regard to police violence, at the time of the retaking of the Renault Flins and Peugeot Sochaux car factories in June 1968) but there is also a preventive repression aimed at discouraging people from demonstrating by means of checks, searches or even prolonged police custody until after the end of the demonstration, even if there is nothing to charge the person stopped with. Special police units have put in place, water cannons and armoured vehicles appeared on the streets, flash balls and defensive grenades have used intensely despite criticism of their danger. The police were fired up against the protesters by inflammatory statements, in the first place by the Interior Minister Christophe Castaner presenting the demonstrators as thugs and looters with “the will to kill our police forces” (statement of 3 December 2018 to the National Assembly). The minister and, on occasion, the president himself made it clear to the police that they would be covered regardless of injuries caused by LBDs, grenades and beatings. The number of wounded and mutilated among the protesters has continued to increase: 7 May we counted one death (an elderly lady leaning at her window in Marseille), five hands torn off, 24 eye injuries, and 284 head injuries, among hundreds of wounded. In addition to protesters, journalists and street medics were targeted by the police. While the Ministry of the Interior has published counts of injured police and despite statements talking about police

being “lynched”, there has not been a single case of serious injury. An attempt to create police files on the hospitalized protesters was denounced by hospital doctors. Certainly, the IGPN (General Inspectorate of the National Police) has had about 200 complaints about police officers referred to it but it investigates cases very slowly and, in the case of the police in Mantes-la-Jolie, who on December 2018, forced 151 schoolchildren and students to stay close to three hours on their knees, handcuffed or with hands on their heads, the IGPN said 16 May that there was no fault or “deviant behaviour” on the part of the police! The slow pace of the IGPN and the justice system when it receives complaints contrasts with the speed of the courts to try and convict the protesters. The dominant media use the terms “protesters”, “thieves” and “looters” indiscriminately, and those who come before the courts see their participation in a social movement amalgamated with the actions of ordinary criminals and are sentenced accordingly.

Macron, his political clique and the “bourgeois bloc” are determined. Their social and political base is weaker than that of De Gaulle in 1968. This is why, reassured also by the less massive nature of the mobilizations and the absence of links with the organized labour movement, the government does not hesitate and will not hesitate to resort to police violence with few limitations. The green light to the police was reiterated on 2 June by Castaner’s deputy, Laurent Nuñez, during the show “Le Grand Jury” on RTL-LCI-Le Figaro: “We have no regrets about how we conducted public order and public safety. This is a crisis unprecedented for fifty or sixty years, no one had to face what we had to face with Christophe Castaner and things still overall went well in terms of public policy... I have every confidence in the police and gendarmes of this country... We know that they used force proportionally in most cases, and force was used only when it was a question of responding to violent aggression against themselves or against our institutions.”

To appreciate the situation of the *gilets jaunes*, it is also necessary to underline the contempt expressed by the upper layers and some intellectuals, including those “of the left”, manifesting a form of what Bourdieu characterized as a “racism of the intelligence ... which makes the dominant feel justified in being dominant”. [10] Admittedly, there have been dissenting voices: some academics have quickly, collectively or individually, provided support to the movement. Writers have also come forward and, after several months, on 4 May a petition of entertainers and cultural personalities was published, some of whom are well known. This is a positive phenomenon, but it is reflected mainly in the signatures of petitions.

## A social front against Macron?

After 1 December many things seemed possible (which does not mean, except to delude oneself, that “everything is possible”). On 3 December the Ministry of Education announced that more than a hundred schools in France were blockaded, at least partially. High school students, protesting against the reforms of the baccalaureate, high school and Parcoursup, demonstrated with the *gilets jaunes*. As already indicated, police repression was unleashed in Mantes-la-Jolie. The *gilets jaunes* begin to blockade fuel depots in north-western France, causing at least a partial fuel shortage in 300 service stations, including 75 in local shortage on 3 December. But, in fact, the convergence did not go beyond local convergences “from below”: the idea that this was the moment did not impose itself. Even in enterprises where employees supported the movement and union sections and activists sought to mobilize. If there is no spontaneity to convergence, the responsibility of the union leadership is no less important.

Certainly, the *gilets jaunes* proclaim themselves apolitical and often proclaim their hostility to both parties and unions. Trade unionists are asked not to fly flags and banners in the demonstrations. But the national trade union leaderships, although divided, come together to varying degrees in passivity and do little to overcome distrust. The CFDT supports the government. Force ouvrière is heterogeneous and paralysed (it has barely emerged from a crisis that has led to a forced change of General Secretary). Some of the members of the CGT are in the movement but the confederal leadership manifests its mistrust, arguing there is a presence of the far right among the *gilets jaunes*.

Solidaires, after initial hesitation, affirmed its support but does not represent a sufficient force to influence the situation. On 6 December 2018, all union confederations, except Solidaires, issued a joint press release to “denounce all forms of violence in the expression of demands”!

But in early December, the movement was still strong, and the government feared the consequences. On 4 December, it decided to give in on fuels: suspension or cancellation of the tax? After hesitation, it would eventually cancel. But the movement is strong. And it was clear that it had other motivations: increase of the CSG, suppression of the ISF, non-increase of SMIC ... everything was questioned. The employers were the first to understand that more concessions were needed: even if production was not blocked, and the planned strikes did not materialize or were little supported (like the call of the CGT and FO transport federations for a strike from 9 December or the movement in chemicals), the leadership of the Medef feared the situation becoming more serious. On 4 December, Geoffroy Roux de Bézieux, the “bosses’ boss”, proposed an increase in the SMIC, but on the condition of lowering employers’ social security contributions on the minimum wage ... In other words, the Social Security or the taxpayer would pay.

## False concessions by government

To give something to employees, without costing the bosses a cent, was an idea that undoubtedly came from the ministerial cabinets work on Macron’s statement, announced for 10 December. But no question of increasing the SMIC itself would appear as a direct victory for employees thanks to the *gilets jaunes*. So, the solution was the unwieldy and complicated employment bonus, falsely presented as a rise in the SMIC. Added to this was exemption from contributions and taxes on overtime and a partial reversal on the increase in the CSG for retirees.

In fact, the increase in the employment bonus does not amount to an increase in the SMIC, it does not count towards retirement and there is no guarantee that it will be revalorized like the SMIC at the end of 2019. The measure on overtime makes it even cheaper: it is an encouragement to use it (especially as its rate of increase can by collective agreement be lowered to 10%) to the detriment of hiring. As for pensioners, the non-increase in the CSG will not offset the programmed decline in the purchasing power of pensions. These measures have a total cost assessed by the government at 10 billion euros. This can be compared to some 18 to 20 billion for 2019 related to the transformation of the CICE and some 4 billion euros of revenue losses resulting from the reform of the ISF. Although understood as a (partial) success of the mobilization (finally, after the numerous defeats accumulated by the traditional mobilizations of these last years), these concessions are part of the political logic of Macronism (in particular the dismantling of the financing of social security protection, in principle based on contributions levied on wages).

The conclusion of Macron’s statement on 10 December is grandiloquent: “We will not resume the normal course of our lives, as too often in the past in similar crises, without anything really being understood and without anything being unchanged.” In fact, he made some concessions to save the essential: the neoliberal reforms already introduced or to come. A little more budget deficit does not bother him if it is to save the hard core of his policy, and he knows that the European Commission will be understanding. Because, as the economist Stefano Palombarini rightly pointed out in his blog on Mediapart: “It is essential to underline that the heart of neoliberalism is not fiscal austerity, but a “flexible” wage relationship, a free hand to employers in employment relations, social protection bent to market rules. Austerity has been used, in France as elsewhere, to show the supposedly ineluctable nature of the neoliberal reforms, which are at the origin of the spread of insecurity, poverty and growing inequalities ...”. [11] Moreover, as Richard Ferrand, the Speaker of the National Assembly noted, “there is no change of course”. Macron also announced the organization of a “Great Debate” involving elected officials, “social partners” and intellectuals, supposedly intended to bring out the aspirations of the French people before new presidential decisions. Among the axes of this “debate”, he introduced immigration and national identity, a theme little touched on publicly by the *gilets jaunes* (which does not mean that some were not sensitive to it).

The first quarter of 2019 was therefore punctuated by the episodes of the “Great Debate” (under high police protection when Macron travelled to the provinces for “dialogue” with selected participants) but, above all, by the successive “acts”, the Saturday events organized by the *gilets jaunes*. However, they declined in number of participants, as well as the presence on the roundabouts but surveys of the population show that support remains in the majority, especially among workers and employees, despite the intense government propaganda on “violence”, the economic cost of the movement, the fact that it no longer had an object at the time of the “Great Debate”. Following a call from the CGT for a day of strike action for 5 February, many *gilets jaunes* (including Éric Drouet) announced their participation, but the CGT did not seek to mobilize massively, or give any perspective beyond this day. On 27 April, at the call of CGT federations and departmental unions critical of the leadership, then on 1 May, *gilets jaunes* and unions found themselves in the same places to protest but, for the most part, without any real linking up.

On 25 April, Macron gave a very long press conference to announce the first decisions or axes of work allegedly stemming from the “Great Debate”. In the area of taxation, he first confirmed that he would not reconsider the measures taken in the last two years. Instead of restoring the ISF and lowering VAT on basic necessities, he announced a cut in income tax estimated at 5 billion euros, while remaining quite vague on its terms and funding. Only 43 per cent of taxpayers pay income tax, which is also one of the rare French progressive taxes, where the more you earn, the more you are taxed. By reducing income tax, we leave aside 57 per cent of the lowest income taxpayers who will continue to pay VAT! With regard to tax evasion and tax fraud, no concrete measures were announced, apart from a new evaluation by the Court of Auditors.

In terms of public services, there came the most spectacular announcement: there will be “by the end of the current five-year presidential term no new closures of hospitals or schools without the approval of the mayor”. In fact, Macron was playing on words: no school closure does not mean no class closures; the same for hospitals, since he did not say: no closures of services. So, maternity and surgical services will continue to disappear. Hospitals and schools were treated to some good presidential words, but not railway stations. Nothing was said on the increasingly threatened so-called secondary train lines more and more subject to cuts. Post offices, too, have been forgotten. Well, not exactly. Macron did indeed announce a project of installation by the end of his presidential term 2,000 “houses” called “France services”, which will include various public services (post office, family allowance fund, health insurance, employment centre and so on) in one place, to allegedly fight the isolation of peripheral areas. In fact, there are currently about 1,300, working more or less well. In fact, “France services” may as well be “France breaks services”!

The question of working time has also been tackled: the French will have to “work more” (as if working hours in France were lower than elsewhere!). To achieve this, Macron is relying on company and sectoral bargaining to increase effective working time, and the terms of the pension reform to lead to the postponement of departures (on pain of a decline in the pension). A gesture for pensioners was still announced: in 2020, retirees earning less than 2,000 euros per month will see their pensions increased at the same rate as inflation. No more pensions would be under-indexed (in relation to the price index) in 2021. But the deindexation of other social benefits and the decline of personal housing aid are not questioned. These social transfers will therefore have their real value deteriorate in the coming years.

Finally, Macron has focused on migration issues, although of the 135,000 contributions [to the Great Debate], only 5,000 (less than 4%) mention them. He stressed “for me, it's the second great European fight, with the climate, it's the fight against migration”. A blatant dog whistle to the right and the far right on the eve of the European elections.

On the economic and social level, the *gilets jaunes* have therefore obtained some concessions from Macron (employment bonus, pension purchasing power): this is more than the unions had managed to achieve, but far from the true demands of the movement, it is only about the government trying to appease the immediate discontent in order to be able to pursue, if possible in a calmed atmosphere (and with a maintained repression) already

programmed reforms.

# By way of a conclusion ...

### 1. Though the demonstrations are continuing, the movement is in decline:

- Because of the repression that managed to separate the most determined elements from the other participants in the initial demonstrations;
- Because of the fatigue of participants who are present Saturday after Saturday (not to mention local actions);
- Because of the inability and unwillingness of the trade union movement to bond with the *gilets jaunes*.

Finally, we must take into account the fact that the movement is facing difficult choices while active participants are less numerous, and the risks of repression are high and that the government feels that it has responded to the movement. What to choose now as forms of action: Return on the roundabouts? Blockade actions? Demonstrations, whether declared or not? Not to mention the issue of the municipal elections of March 2020 that has surfaced in some debates. But no one can say at the time this article is written that the movement is over, that it has been a parenthesis: twists are possible, and the social and political crisis is not closed.

### 2. The crisis of the state is obvious, an organic crisis of the “integral state” in a Gramscian sense.

- Macron is widely hated and devalued: his base is clearly reduced in essence to the higher social categories and it is increasingly markedly to the right;
- the trade unions have not been able to take advantage of the breach opened by the *gilets jaunes* and continue to weaken;
- the political parties are shaken to varying degrees and challenged as an expression of democracy;
- some of those who had been eliminated from the political and social game have found their voice;
- the government is essentially based on the resources offered by the institutions of the Fifth Republic and the police, with a smaller social base than that of De Gaulle in 1968 (one of the signs is that it has failed to organize the least significant demonstration of support).

The European elections were a half-success for Macron, camped in a posture of being the only electoral alternative to the RN. The government feels strong enough to return to the contemptuous attitude of the beginning of the movement: it is now claiming that the demonstrations have no object and that there is no future for the movement. But this presumption does not solve the fundamental question of the narrowness of its social base and its relays.

Regarding the RN vote among the *gilets jaunes*, an IPSOS survey conducted on the eve of the European Parliament poll showed that 50% of them said that they would not vote and that 44% of those who would vote would do so for the RN. It is therefore difficult to suggest that the movement would have fed only the RN vote.

### 3. Trade unionism and the left, including the radical left, needs to make their own examination.

Faced with a new and complex phenomenon, there was rejection of the movement by some trades unionists, ecologists and the left and a more or less great difficulty for sectors more open to the movement in defining a position.

The *gilets jaunes* were situated outside what Bourdieu called “the dominant definition of the proper struggle”, they were able to “scare the leaders” – to use an expression from a study on Peugeot-Sochaux evoking the past era when employers were actually afraid of the working class. [12] This allowed them to impose on the neoliberal roller coaster its first setbacks since 1995 (or 2006, with hindsight, on the CPE first employment contract). But what is to be made of such radicalism when it comes to mobilizing broad masses and not a minority? How can we organize it?

Among the so-called radical political forces:

– Some (La France Insoumise) affirmed support for the *gilets jaunes* considered as proof of the validity of a populist orientation (in the sense of Laclau-Mouffe), without expressing any point of view on the conditions of a social victory because their priority was above all to make the movement a point of support of their electoral tactics.

– Others (Lutte Ouvrière) did not participate much in the movement and saw it above all as a form of confused cross-class mobilization in which the interests of the employees risked being forgotten.

– With regard to the NPA, it generally avoided both of these and participated (with a small delay) in the movement while denouncing the far-right manoeuvres and stressing that the *gilets jaunes* could not win alone. So, it did what he could to create a convergence with the unions, but with too little resources to weigh significantly (otherwise than locally and even then in only a few places) on both *gilets jaunes* and unions.

Overall, the trade union and political “left” have not benefited from the social movement of the Gilets jaunes: it is a question in itself. It would probably be wrong to forget this and rush to draw up balance sheets and draw perspectives in the light of the recent European election results alone.

To conclude, it is difficult to respond to the question “whither France?”. [13] The *gilets jaunes* undoubtedly constitute the proof of the instability of the situation. Yet, in the context of the existing political and social relationship of forces, this situation is heavy with dangers, inasmuch as the risks of economic crisis become clearer. Macron, for his part, certainly intends to pursue his neoliberal authoritarian policy in a European Union without any project other than austerity and the rejection of immigrants.

*Translated from Inprecor No 664-665, June-July 2019.*

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[1] On the use of French military force (nuclear weapons, military interventions, notably in Africa) as a counterweight to relative economic decline

## Macron and the Gilets jaunes

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France, see Claude Serfati, *Le Militaire, une histoire française*, Editions Amsterdam, 2017.

[2] “Emmanuel Macron incarne la réunification de la bourgeoisie”, interview in *l'Humanité*, May 15, 2018.

[3] “Anglo-Saxon” is a term used by French-speaking political commentators to designate the bourgeois political and economic sphere dominated by the USA and Britain. [IVP].

[4] Alexandre Benalla was a member of Macron’s staff. See [Benalla affair](#).

[5] Michel Husson, *A l'Encontre*, 30 November 2018, [“Les fondements microéconomiques de la connerie”](#).

[6] Alain Bihr, *Ici et ailleurs*, 21 May 2019, [“Les Â« gilets jaunes Â» : un soulèvement populaire contre l'acte II de l'offensive néolibérale”](#).

[7] *Sud Ouest*, 11 January 2019, [“Pourquoi Bordeaux est-elle devenue un bastion des gilets jaunes??”](#).

[8] Samuel Hayat, 5 December 2019 [“Les Gilets Jaunes, l'économie morale et le pouvoir”](#).

[9] Serge Halimi & Pierre Rimbert, “Luttes de classes en France”, *le Monde diplomatique*, February 2019.

[10] Pierre Bourdieu, *Questions de sociologie*, éditions de Minuit, 1981.

[11] Stefano Palombarini, *Mediapart*, 21 December 2018, [“Les gilets jaunes. le néolibéralisme et la gauche”](#).

[12] Stéphane Beaud and Michel Pialoux, *Retour sur la condition ouvrière. Enquête aux usines Peugeot de Sochaux-Montbéliard*. Paris, La Découverte, 1999, republication 2012.

[13] The title of a text by Leon Trotsky from late October 1934 where we find these observations, still relevant in the context of the multiform crisis of society: “In all countries the same historic laws operate, the laws of capitalist decline. If the means of production remain in the hands of a small number of capitalists, there is no way out for society. It is condemned to go from crisis to crisis, from need to misery, from bad to worse. In the various countries the decrepitude and disintegration of capitalism are expressed in diverse forms and at unequal rhythms. But the basic features of the process are the same everywhere.” This text also contains long sections on the middle classes, arguing that “it does not at all follow that the working class can turn its back on the petty bourgeoisie, leaving it to its fate. Leon Trotsky, 1934 [“Whither France?”](#).”