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France

The yellow vests mean revolt

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“The yellow vests struggle is a class struggle, a conflict based on social hatred...and all the repressive forces at the service of his holiness have been mobilized against it...The king stands naked.”

G rard Mordillat, *Telerama*, December 10, 2018

This interview was conducted by Josu Egireun for Viento Sur where it was published on 12 December with an introduction by Egireun.

AROUND A month since its first mobilization, and after several weekends in a row of national protests, the yellow vests movement, arrogantly dismissed by the elite and facing unprecedented repression, has twice forced the government to retreat.

The first instance came on December 4 when the prime minister froze gas tax increases for six months. The second came when President Emmanuel Macron announced a string of concessions on December 10. Yet both failed to calm the yellow vests' anger, nor were they convincing to the majority of the population who supports the movement.

From the beginning, left-wing political and social forces have harbored doubts about this movement: Is it supported by the extreme right? Because it opposes fuel tax hikes, is it anti-environment?

These doubts that have been dissipating as social movements and unions have joined the yellow vests at the local level, especially since the national day of mobilization against climate change on December 8.

And they have all but evaporated since a poll released by France 2 TV that asked yellow-vest protesters their political preferences and their main concerns: 33 percent say they are neither left nor right, 15 percent describe themselves as extreme left and 5.4 percent say far right.

The two most important demands among the protesters are for the government to increase household purchasing power and reduce taxes, while concern about immigration ranks near the bottom. And remarkably, for the first time in France, the movement is made up equally of women and men.

This is a movement that is developing its own language   ” one that we must learn in order to dialogue with it. It is a movement that, over the last weeks, has seen labor unions beginning to mobilize in a halting manner.

France's biggest union coalition, the General Confederation of Workers, called for a day of general mobilization on December 14, and in some regions, like Ile-de-France, this garnered support from other unions and federations, such as Workers Force, public employees in the United Workers Federation, the left-wing Solidaires union coalition, and the Union of French Students.

There were also militant and harshly repressed mobilizations in schools, including the occupation of Nanterre University that began December 11 with an assembly of 3,000 students.

HOW DO you evaluate the proposals made by Macron in his message to the nation?

THIS IS the second time the government has stepped back since the December 4 announcement of the cancellation of the gas tax. Now they are retreating on a proposed increase from 6.6 percent to 8.3 percent in Social Security taxes that were imposed in January 2018.

These retreats increased everyone's confidence. People began to be conscious of the fact that struggle pays off. Of course, the measures that have been announced so far are very modest and very late in the game, and most of all, there's a lot of smoke and mirrors.

For example, the 100 euro (\$114) increase in the minimum wage (SMIC) isn't what it seems because it's not a net increase in the SMIC, but only an increase in a limited government subsidy for low-income workers. And this will be paid by taxpayers, not the employers.

Thus, it's not an increase in the minimum wage, but only a subsidy. In fact, this really pisses off even more people and therefore will only spur further mobilizations.

A YELLOW vest from the city of Rennes defines the movement as "the drop of gasoline that overflows the tank." How would you describe the yellow vests?

I THINK it is a real uprising. It is not yet a massive uprising of the majority, but it is a real uprising.

It isn't a traditional social mobilization. From the outset, it's gone on the offensive. Until now in France, we haven't seen a generalized movement go on the offensive since 1968.

This movement has demanded, in one way or another, an increase in wages and a reduction in the cost of living — that is, it calls for a redistribution of wealth. This isn't a defensive movement against this or that government counter-reform, but an offensive struggle.

On the other hand, it is a totally heterogeneous movement — the product of an uprising that originates from deep within society. It does not spring from traditional organizations. Far from it, this is a movement that has crystallized all the rage and indignation accumulated in society — a movement in which all the previous mobilizations coalesce and all the anger that until now has not been translated into action finds an outlet. In effect, it is the drop of water that overflows the glass.

THROUGHOUT THESE last three weeks of mobilization, the movement's determination, its radical nature, but at the same time its democratic, horizontal functioning and its ability organize four days of national mobilization, have been striking. So is the apparent politicization of those who act as spokespersons, taking into account that they are people without any previous political experience.

WE SHOULD note from the outset the way that the conflict has been covered in the press and the response it has received from the political class. The mobilizations and the movement's activists have produced a class arrogance from the elite, similar to the contempt we saw in France during the referendum on the European Constitutional Treaty in 2005.

Now, in the face of this, we are witnessing a real politicization of the people. In France right now, there are tens of

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thousands, and maybe hundreds of thousands, of people in the process of becoming politicized in record time.

The challenge for us, on behalf of the organized social and political movements in France, is to stand with this movement so that it has the most anti-capitalist expression possible. However, we cannot deny the reality of our times, including the maneuvers and the attempts by the extreme right to capture it.

This is a real problem, and there is no use denying that this is part of the scenario. Therefore, the coming together of the yellow vests and social movements “ which is being organized from below, at the local level ” is a very important element in response to the manipulative attempts of the extreme right.

The determination, radicalism, combativeness and vigilance of hundreds of people, the barricades in the Champs Élysées “ all this recalls memories of an underground history of revolution and of general strikes in France.

It also reminds us of the defeats of the traditional workers movement of the last 15 or 20 years. Over those years, the level of confrontation didn't go beyond a certain point, and many believed our more radical history had disappeared from collective consciousness.

But the reality was different. Even people who have not participated in these mobilizations are aware of the impasse facing traditional forms of struggle.

We may also be witnessing an attempt to resolve the underlying problems, to create a relationship of forces that can win, by looking for a shortcut that relies on radical actions. That is, hoping that certain forms of action might, in and of themselves, solve the deeper problems.

But there are no shortcuts. If we want to push back Macron, we must organize greater numbers “ we must surpass the size of the current mobilizations. We will have to break the glass ceiling that has so far limited the scope of participation, even for the yellow vests.

Today, we are facing a problem that we are very familiar with in France during these last years. We have seen hundreds of thousands of people participate in mobilizations, but they fail to go further.

The novelty of the yellow vests is that 70 percent of the population supports them. We are witnessing a scenario similar to the one we experienced in France in 1995, a dynamic we defined as a “strike by delegation” “ meaning that 10 percent of a union mobilized to take action, while another 70 percent was willing to support them.

What we need is to transform the minority taking action into collective action. This is the only way to really push back Macron.

HOW IS it possible that this movement pushed back the government in three weeks, while, for example, in 2010, millions of people mobilized on the streets against the pension reform, but lost that fight?

BECAUSE WE are seeing a potential unity that has scared the government.

A lot of attention has been paid to violent confrontations in Paris, but the most important thing is that broad sectors of the population are acting together everywhere, including retired people, workers, the unemployed and students “ mobilizations in post-secondary institutes started a week ago.

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In particular, it is the youth who scare the government. We have to point out the almost semi-insurrectional character of the slogans that the movement has adopted.

I have never known mobilizations like these – thousands of people who want to go to the center of Paris, the Champs-Élysées, just like I imagine peasants did in their time to rebel against the lord, by going to his castle to demand accountability. All this weighs heavily on the situation.

JUDGING BY the first reactions to the Macron’s statements, all signs point to the mobilizations continuing, which raises the possibility of a large social and political crisis. But this is a social and political crisis that comes at a time when left-wing alternatives on a national scale are absent.

THE PROBLEM we face is that from now on, we must rebuild everything. We are witnessing a political crisis of the Fifth Republic and of political representation, and it is Macron who is paying for it. Keep in mind that Macron, in a sense, was the last option for the ruling class, even if he was not their first choice.

Macron positioned himself outside the traditional parties. Some sections of the elite joined him before the elections and others later. And from the beginning, he launched a powerful offensive against two emblematic social forces: the students and youth and the railway workers. He raised university selection standards for student and youth and forced through the dismantling of public rail service on the transport workers.

Macron’s problem is that the current political crisis will not allow him to continue on this path. One section of the elite believes Macron has been weakened and may no longer represent a good option for them. After all, as long as Macronism works, it works, but when it fails, it threatens to create vacuum of power. For 10 days up until the December 10 speech, Macron was missing in action, and the speech itself does nothing but add fuel to the fire.

Therefore, the only possible, credible political perspectives for the social movement and the left is for this movement to win, to be politicized and to develop a form of political representation for itself.

In any case, we do not believe a clear answer can be presented for the next elections – especially the European Union elections, where the left is totally fragmented. We must think beyond these.

This movement must create a political foundation for a new social and political constellation of forces. With all due humility, this is what I believe we must hope for in the first instance. And I think we must thoroughly examine everything that has not worked in the different attempts to reconstruct the left.

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