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France

What is at stake in the “yellow jacket” mobilization

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For nearly a month, an unprecedented movement has been developing in France.

On 17 November 2018, at least 2,500 blockades of road junctions and motorway toll booths were reported in all regions, involving, according to the police, at least 300,000 *gilets jaunes* (“yellow jackets” – protesters wearing a hi-vis safety jacket, mandatory in vehicles). The following week, many blockades continued in secondary cities and in rural areas. Last Saturday, 24 November many actions took place: more than 100,000 participants, including at least 8,000 in Paris on the Champs Elysees, with 1600 blockades identified in the regions. [1]

This movement was not initiated by any party or trade union. It has been built entirely from social networks, around rejection of a further increase in the carbon tax on fuels through the TICPE (TICPE, domestic consumption tax on energy products) scheduled for 1 January 2019: +6.5 cents on a litre of diesel and 2.9 cents on a litre of SP95. By 2018, the tax on diesel had already increased by 7.6 cents. On 1 litre of diesel fuel costing €1.45, the state currently receives about 60% in tax, or 85.4 cents. The government plans in 2020 and 2021 to increase this further, by 6.5 cents each year. This is the largest diesel tax percentage in Europe after the United Kingdom and Italy. But in France, unlike most other European countries, diesel is very much in the majority and accounts for 80% of fuel consumption. The price of diesel has risen by 23% over the past year.

An online petition against these tax increases, quoted in an article in the country's leading daily newspaper *Le Parisien*, gathered hundreds of thousands of signatures in mid-October and more than a million by early November. From there, hundreds of Facebook groups sprang up all over the country, videos against the tax were viewed millions of times on the internet (including one made by a local representative of the far-right group “Debout la France”). A lorry driver called for a blockade of the Parisian ring road on November 17. From then the date of November 17 became the date chosen by all groups for thousands of local initiatives to block roads and roundabouts, listed on a site set up for the occasion by two yellow jacket Internet users. The major daily news media (particularly BFM TV) took up the story, amplifying the phenomenon.

Starting from the mere signing of a petition, the movement spread like wildfire.

What kind of movement?

This movement has confronted the government, but also the trade union and political leaderships! The contrast was striking between its extension in the popular classes, the broad sympathy, especially in workplaces, the massive support of the population (70% support on the eve of November 14) and the caricature that was made in many left circles, decrying, pell-mell, the hand of the road transport employers and that of the extreme right. However, all the employers' unions in road transport condemned the blockades, asking the government to clear them; as far as the extreme right is concerned, it is true that Nicolas Dupont Aignan, leader of the movement “Debout la France” has been enthusiastic since mid-October, displaying his yellow jacket on the media. Similarly, the Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement national has shown its support, while disavowing roadblocks. Most organizers of the *gilets jaunes* have clearly wanted to mark their distance with this inconvenient support. Discreetly, “les Républicains” and the Socialist Party have expressed their sympathy with the movement. On the other hand, while leaders of France insoumise, such as Jean-Louis Mélenchon or François Ruffin have expressed support for the movement in several televised interventions, as has Olivier Besancenot of the NPA, all major trade unions, not only the CFDT and FO but also the CGT and Solidaires have refused to support the demonstrations, insisting on the manipulations of the far-right and the road transport bosses.

The reality is that the yellow jackets reflect a profound movement among the popular classes. Every day 17 million people work outside of their municipality of residence, i.e. 2/3 of those economically active. Of these 2/3, 80% use their own vehicle. The concern for the cost of fuel is therefore a popular concern, in the greater Paris region and in the regions in particular (even in the Paris region, only one in two employees uses public transport to go to work). The question of the supplementary tax therefore concerns the vast majority of employees!

Employees, especially families, are forced to live farther away from urban centres, and precariousness accentuates the distance from the workplace. In the Paris region, the 50% of employees who take a car to go to work are most often those who are forced to live on the periphery or work in staggered hours.

The cost of car transport, and in particular diesel has exploded in a context where the official level of inflation has been used as a pretext for not increasing wages. The yellow jackets polarize a popular exasperation, with an obvious class character regarding purchasing power, wages and pensions.

But this exasperation also catalyses the diffuse anger caused by the discredit of the government, the accumulation of attacks on purchasing power and pensions, in the face of the many gifts made to the rich, to the capitalists. The discredit also of the political parties which having all managed the country in turn are responsible for this social situation. Macron had benefited from this discredit in order to get elected and now it has a boomerang effect.

Through government tax reforms - removing the ISF wealth tax, a flat tax on capital incomes - the wealthiest 1% will see their incomes rise by 6% in 2019, the richest 0.4% will see their purchasing power increase by €28,300, the richest 0.1% by €86,290. Meanwhile, the least wealthy 20% will see their incomes fall, with the absence of increased social benefits, the reform of housing allowances, the decline in pensions, while prices are increasing.

Unpopularity and governmental crisis

Macron is viewed by a very large part of the population as the president of the rich, the very wealthy. The increase in fuel taxes, hitting employees on the lowest wages, after such gifts to the richest classes, was experienced as the straw that broke the camel's back.

Moreover, through its class politics and its discredit, the Macron government has entered an accelerated crisis since the summer. The Benalla affair was the scandal of the summer. Alexandre Benalla, a personal security officer of Macron, was convicted of assaulting demonstrators on May 1 last year, revealing presidential practices using state services according to personal need, recalling in a different way the Fillon scandal on the eve of the presidential election. This Benalla scandal was followed by the resignation of Nicolas Hulot, Macron's environmental front man, after many denials of environmental commitments. In the aftermath, Collomb, Minister of the Interior and an early supporter of the president, also resigned in early autumn. These successive internal crises testify to the accelerated erosion of this government and the weakness of its political and social base.

All polls give Macron a level of popularity lower than that of Francois Holland after an identical period in office.

The demands of the yellow jackets

All the messages of the *gilets jaunes* on the social networks or on the blockades demand withdrawal of the fuel

taxes, but beyond that there is anger at the cost of living, the demand for the reinstatement of the wealth tax and often purely and simply the resignation of Macron.

To justify its fuel tax and gain popular support, the government notes the need to fight global warming and at the same time fight against emissions of greenhouse gases and fine particulates. The government spokesperson, Benjamin Grivaux, tried to win support from the environmentalist left by denouncing "those who smoke cigarettes and drive with diesel." But even in the environmentalist electorate, the increase in taxes did not meet a favourable echo and the contemptuous haughtiness of the government has not impressed.

The fundamental reason for this is that all the policies of the government as of its predecessors ignore the ecological imperatives of the hour: after favouring all-car and diesel, nothing is done to develop public transport, in rural areas and in the periphery of large cities, while the working classes must travel ever greater distances from their workplaces and urban centres. There is an unbearable government arrogance in charging more to people who will not be able to change their mode of travel or vehicle! With the attacks on the SNCF, the government intends to remove more than 11,000 kms of railways and rail freight has been largely sacrificed for the benefit of the road. At the same time, Total is exempt from any tax contribution and has a free hand to continue mining exploration. In addition, the debates on the 2019 finance law have revealed that more than 500 million euros from the fuel tax will serve, not ecological transition, but to replenish the deficit of the 2019 budget, to compensate for the abolition of the wealth tax.

For weeks, the government and the media have tried to discredit, with condescending contempt, the movement, as that of “France of the periphery”, of the “forgotten territories”, to make it a “jacquerie” of uneducated people, unaware of climate change.

And the organized workers’ movement?

The workers’ movement and its organizations did not initiate this “yellow jackets” movement. This reflects its loss of influence in many regions and working groups. It is also, as the leaders of ATTAC and Copernicus say in a column in *le Monde*, the result of the cumulative failures of social movements in recent years. [2] The readiness to set up blockades, to carry out direct actions is also the rejection of traditional forms of demonstrations, but is a continuation of the actions of blockades carried out in recent years by the combative social sectors.

Moreover, the policy practiced by the trade union leaderships, the weakness of the relays of such a popular movement is problematic. This policy has taken as a pretext the manoeuvres of the extreme right or the “apolitical” nature of the yellow jackets. But as the leaders of ATTAC and Copernicus say in the above-mentioned column “we will not fight this defiance, nor the instrumentalization by the extreme right, nor the risk of anti-taxism, by practicing the politics of the Empty Chair or blaming the demonstrators. It is on the contrary about giving ourselves the means to weigh within it and to win the cultural and political battle inside this movement against the extreme right and the employers’ forces who want to subjugate it.”

Many union structures and activists, have not hesitated to lend their support and to call to participate in the actions of the *gilets jaunes*: in the summer this was the case in particular with CGT métallurgie, Sud industrie, FO Transports, with several unitary departmental appeals that advanced an industrial platform for wage increases, against indirect taxation that hits the popular classes and for a progressive income tax. Often, these calls clearly rejected fuel taxes, while emphasizing the need for a genuine environmental policy hitting Total, developing public transport and rail freight in the face of road transport.

In the activist networks, even in the press, all reports testify to the popular reality of this movement, composed essentially of employees and retirees alongside the self-employed or small entrepreneurs, all those who, with low incomes, are suffering the government's attacks in full force. The NPA activists who participated in the blockades or even distributed leaflets also testify to a good welcome and above all agreement with requirements for the reinstatement of the ISF and the end of tax gifts for the richest.

What's at stake in the movement

There are therefore major political stakes in this movement, whatever the consequences. What is key is to make it democratically structured and convergent with the organizations of the workers' movement who want to conduct a common struggle, through a general confrontation with the regime. The government hopes to see in the yellow vests only a disturbing parenthesis before a return to “normal” political and social life. After November 17th, all the media dwelled heavily on the clashes, those wounded on the blockades and the death of a *gilet jaune*, crushed by a motorist. They also highlighted racist and homophobic acts that were unacceptable but very marginal, committed on roadblocks, trying to discredit the whole movement. Even if it is more prudent than with the demonstrations of the social movement, the government has severely suppressed the blockades of recent days, and in particular the demonstration on the Champs Elysees last Saturday. Little accustomed to street demonstrations and even less to clashes, many *gilets jaunes* have been shocked by such violence, but it does not hinder their determination and willingness to set up new blockades. The government hopes that the images of the clashes and the approach of the end of year festivities will lead to the extinction of this movement. If the workers' movement thought the same thing, it would be a big mistake. Although marginal, the far right is waiting to ambush this movement and hopes that no anti-capitalist perspective will arise to give it perspectives. The “Forconi” episode in 2013 in Italy [3], with which the yellow jackets have points of comparison, must alert particularly anti-capitalists who want the popular anger and social exasperation not only to be turned against this government of the rich but also to pave the way for an anti-capitalist offensive, a bearer of emancipation.

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[1] On the same day demonstrations against violence against women were also taking place around the country. Police estimated the Paris march at 12 000, the organisers at 30 000.

[2] Copernic Foundation [“Les gilets jaunes sont aussi le produit d’une succession d’échecs du mouvement social”](#).

[3] See [“A new wave of mobilizations?”](#).