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France

Women in the yellow jacket movement: class revolt, gender transgression

- IV Online magazine - 2018 - IV527 - December 2018 -

Publication date: Saturday 22 December 2018

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In recent days, the media has reported on the significant presence of women of all ages in the yellow jackets' mobilization. On the ground, they are indeed present at roundabouts and appear regularly in the media. Several figures have emerged, such as Priscilla Ludoski, who initiated a petition that gathered nearly a million signatures, or Jacline Mouraud, who posted a video on facebook at the end of October. [1] They denounce the decline in their purchasing power, tax injustices, low salaries, but also the condescension of the government and its contempt for the working class, summed up by the slogan calling for Emmanuel Macron to resign. [2]

Women's participation in strikes and social movements is nothing new, especially against the cost of living. From the 18th century onwards, they have been involved in revolts, whether about food, against taxes or anti-seigneurial: they could then take centre stage, urging men to follow them. Arlette Farge wrote that "in revolt, women function differently from men, the latter know it, consent to it and yet judge them. From the outset, they are the ones who take centre stage, urging men to follow them, occupying the front ranks of the riot. In this moment of the "world turned upside down" men are not surprised; jostled by cries and exhortations, they swell the crowd with their presence.

They know well how much the women put forward impress the authorities, they still know that they fear little, since they are less punishable, and that this disorder of things can be the guarantee of a later success of their movement. They know, accept these male and female roles, and yet at the same time they judge: women, their cries, gestures and behaviours. Fascinated, irritated, they see them and describe them as abusive, even excessive." [3]

These few words by Arlette Farge summarizing the role played by 18th century rioters could also relate to their involvement in social movements on the one hand or to political life on the other. Whether they are the initiators of the struggle or simply taking part, they are often judged by men when they demonstrate or strike because it ultimately constitutes a gender transgression and as a result, they can be criticized or even discredited.

In October 1789, they gathered against the high cost of bread and marched to Versailles to call out to the monarch. They then brought back to Paris "the baker, the baker and the little mitron", whom they considered as the guarantors of a decent life, and therefore the ones responsible for their miseries. They were also involved in the uprisings that marked the 19th century.

Similarly, during the "Belle Époque", historian Anaïs Albert shows that working class women remained the mainstay of mobilizations against the high cost of living, working conditions and low wages, as was the case with the Midinettes in 1917, because they were responsible for consumption in working class households and because it was an important part of the domestic work they had to provide. [4]

These revolts were not simply spontaneous and spasmodic, and therefore not worthy of being heard: on the contrary, their specific rationality was revealed by the historian E.P. Thompson, in his work on the formation of the working class in England. In addition to poverty, it is the feeling of injustice that is at the root of the mobilization, an event experienced by the actors as the rupture of a tacit social contract.

In the 1970s, striking women workers put dignity at work first, considering that this contract was broken when they were humiliated, belittled on a daily basis by small bosses, victims of contempt from the hierarchy. Beyond wage demands or demands linked to the organisation of work, dignity and recognition were therefore an essential part of their struggles at the time, where the boundaries between what was just and unjust were at stake.

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However, in the history of mixed struggles, women often tend to be relegated to the rank of witnesses, with the organization and strategy of mobilization being mainly carried out by male trade unionists. In the context of mixed strikes, in industry, women workers are often relegated to a witness position thus a strategy can be developed without them.

At Moulinex in 1968, while they were involved in the struggles and solicited by the media to report on their daily lives in the factory, it was male trade unionists who met with management and negotiated, while at the same time feminists also developed a reflection on the relationship between women's struggles and class struggle, drawing on the experience of women workers without always involving them in strategic thinking.

In all the social mobilizations of the recent period, women's involvement is also strong and yet surprising. This involvement of women is always new. Their presence is then understood as a sign of exceptional mobilization: if even women get involved... In reality, what is surprising is that their participation is forgotten, in other words, their retrospective invisibility.

They have mobilized decisively for several years, with predominantly women's strikes, in the health sector with nurses, for example, or in the cleaning sector. In the fall of 2017, Onet employees went on strike for several dozen days to denounce their working conditions in the stations, while those of the Holiday Inn mobilized against the impossible pace of work demanded. At the moment, for example, the strike by cleaning women at the Park Hyatt Vend me hotel has brought out not only their work but also their working conditions, due to the gendered but also racial division of labour.

Today, with the yellow jackets, women's involvement is partly linked to their taking charge of domestic work, unpaid work carried out mainly by women (even if this is not the only impetus of their movement): it is still up to them to make ends meet in the household and the family.

In a context where it is impossible for many of them to fulfil this task, mobilization makes it possible to reveal in the public arena what was hidden in the private sphere: if many no longer manage, it is because problems generally experienced as personal have social causes, that the private is political.

In addition, some women involved in yellow jacket work in personal service occupations where forms of collective organization and mobilization, in and through work, are difficult to implement: mobilizing with yellow jackets means bringing their difficult working and living conditions to the forefront and politicizing them. This is reflected in the first results published by an ongoing survey on yellow jackets: many of them are carers or home helps. [5] Some raise their children alone. [6]

What may change in the publicity of the yellow jacket movement is that the invisibility of women is partially made visible and debated (although this remains partial because on some evenings on BFMTV, for example, more airtime is given to men). This phenomenon is probably linked to the increase in the legitimacy of women's voices in recent months.

With the feminist sequence unfolding on a global scale, from the 8 March strike in Spain to the abortion rights mobilizations in Argentina, from #MeToo in the United States to the 24 November demonstration in France, a new feminist wave is developing. [7] It promotes women's voice in the media space.

If the introduction of "official" yellow jacket spokespersons was symptomatic of the tendency for women to disappear - they were 2 out of 8 spokespersons -, the originality of the movement is precisely that it does not have a leadership where men can monopolize attention. The forms of democratic organization as they sometimes emerge in the

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movement cannot therefore miss their word. Feminist initiatives - general assemblies, contingents in demonstrations - are also being taken to make women and their demands even more visible within the movement.

17 December 2018

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[1] Jacline Mouraud came to prominence through this video and has thus become a “spokesperson” of the yellow jackets. Video [here](#).

[2] A shortened version of this article was published in *Le Monde* and translated by [Jacobin](#). This full version was published in [Contretemps](#) and translated by *International Viewpoint*.

[3] Arlette Farge “Protesters Plain to See” Chapter 17 in Natalie Zemon Davis, Arlette Farge (eds) *A History of Women in the West: Renaissance and Enlightenment Paradoxes volume 3*, Harvard University Press 1993.

[4] Albert, Anaïs. “Les midinettes parisiennes à la Belle Époque : bon goût ou mauvais genre ?”, *Histoire, économie & société*, vol. 32nd year, No. 3, 2013, pp. 61-74.

[5] *Le Monde* “A pioneering study of the revolt of the ‘low incomes’ ” [« Gilets jaunes » : une enquête pionnière sur la « révolte des revenus modestes »](#).

[6] A French reportage “Why so many women in the yellow jackets?” [“Pourquoi autant de femmes en gilets jaunes-”](#).

[7] See by the same author [Beyond the rejection of the law for the legalization of abortion in Argentina: a fourth feminist wave?](#).