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France

The yellow jackets' movement destabilizes Macron

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Since the beginning of December, France has been in a political crisis from which Macron hoped to escape with the statement he made on Monday evening 10 December. The yellow jackets' movement has been growing since mid-November. Saturday 1 December was a turning point, bringing about a change in the social crisis.

The clashes on the Champs Elysées in Paris were the symbol of the day, but in all cities the level of mobilization, on average equal to that of the previous week, saw a higher level of confrontation. Toulouse, Marseille, Le Puy en Velay where the prefecture was attacked by yellow jackets...

Everywhere this radicalization was accompanied by the generalization of the slogan "Macron must resign". The images of the police chased from the Arc de Triomphe, tagged and occupied by yellow jackets, have spread across the world, crystallizing the political crisis and Macron's personal destabilization.

At the same time, before 1 December, support for the yellow jacket movement led to an even greater class polarization, clearly bringing the working classes together, and opposing the more urban and wealthier classes.

In the preceding days, a convergence with sectors of the trade union movement began to take shape in a series of cities. This took the form of, at least partly, joint rallies with the long-planned CGT demonstrations for rights for the unemployed on 1 December, and also direct calls from local trade union branches in the private sector, the SNCF and the Post Office to join the yellow jackets' demonstrations.

Thus, despite the initial caricature that spread through the ranks of the trade union movement and the social and radical left stigmatizing it as a "yellow-brown" movement, gradually the character and social content of the movement's demands became clear. Although it is socially mixed, there is a great preponderance of working class forces involved. So dikes broke, opening the way to convergence and therefore to a change in the balance of forces.

The question of "purchasing power" has gradually shifted from the simple question of the rise in fuel tax to the general question of taxes, to indirect taxation affecting the working classes, focusing on the abolition of the wealth tax and tax gifts for the wealthy. The question of the distribution of wealth has explicitly appeared in many statements and slogans of the yellow jackets. The issues of pensions, attacks on pensions, wages and the minimum wage have come to the fore, allowing an explicit link to workers' demands.

So even before 1 December, the dynamic was a class dynamic, marginalizing the far right, not in its audience among some of the yellow jackets but in the distance from its favourite themes: immigration as the cause of all evils, "tax bludgeoning", putting in the same bag taxes and all taxes paid by the working classes or employers, and a demagogic attack against state employees. [\[1\]](#)

After 1 December, France entered a deep political crisis. With their backs to the wall, Macron and the deputies of En Marche saw what little popular support they had left melt away, reducing it to the hard core of the ruling class.

Macron began to crack, seeing that his image as popular president had been destroyed internationally, and that even the violence of the 1 December clashes had not lessened popular support for the yellow jackets' movements.

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In a panic the next day Prime Minister Edouard Philippe announced the suspension of the fuel tax for 6 months, and then its cancellation for 2019.

But as the press says, it was "too little and too late"!

Not only were the yellow jackets not satisfied with these first concessions over tax increases, but we were encouraged to continue the struggle. All those who have been under attack for at least two years and been defeated one after another began to see an opportunity to make their voices heard: farmers, truck drivers, port and dock workers...

The government, by starting to back down, wanted to dramatize the situation, stirring up the threat of chaos, of the putsch, evoking the spectre of the extreme right, thus trying to break the popular support of the movement and avoid a junction with the workers' movement on 8 December.

Macron himself remained silent until 8 December, fearing to crystallize discontent once again, but called on all the "intermediate bodies" he had himself tried to put aside: deputies and senators, mayors, trade union leaders, so that they could do the job of calling for calm through major statements highlighting "social dialogue".

The trade union leaders, except Solidaires, published a lamentable inter-union statement, a "call to order", a statement disavowed in the CGT by a large number of federations and departmental unions. At the same time, the CGT, under pressure from its base, called for a day of mobilization...on Friday, 14 December.

This tactic was a complete failure up to 8 December. Not only were the government's retreats seen as an encouragement, but the junction began to take place in different cities and regions with sections of the trade union movement. These convergences appeared in the street on 8 December. There were as many demonstrators as on 1 December, and in many cities and towns there were mixed marches of yellow jackets incorporating social movement activists and often linking up with climate.

All these elements have contributed to the radicalization of the yellow jacket movement on social questions, limiting the impact of the extreme right-wing elements still present in the movement.

At the same time, between 100 and 200 high schools went on strike or blocked on the eve of 8 December. This movement has been the re-emphasis of demands against the reform of access to the University, through the Parcoursup process, and against a reform of the baccalaureate along the same lines.

On 8 December, there were numerous clashes in different cities, particularly around the prefectures - symbols of the state. [2] Police violence and repression increased tenfold: more than 1000 arrests, meaning a large number of "preventive" arrests, a tenfold increase in the use of attacks the marches and high school demonstrations, with systematic use of tear gas grenades and flash balls, injuring hundreds of demonstrators. Eighty-five thousand police officers were deployed against demonstrators with police and gendarme armoured vehicles.

We are witnessing a completely new style of general fight against austerity policy and the government, against all anti-social measures, for social justice measures and wage increases, and directly against Macron.

For the first time since Macron's election, and even for the first time since 1995, the balance of forces has really begun to shift, and all the sections of the working classes that have been attacked, and often fought and been defeated separately, in recent years can see an opportunity to get back into action. But the paradox is still that the

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organized workers' movement and even the workers, as collectives in workplaces, have not – up to now – taken the responsibility for extending through strike action what is very largely a popular movement in which many workers participate individually.

On 10 December Macron broke his silence to try to give a more “humble” image to a president who has cultivated his class arrogance for 18 months, and to try to extinguish the fire of mobilization.

He wanted to highlight three spectacular measures on purchasing power: a supposed increase of 100 euros in the minimum wage, cancelling the CSG (social security contribution) increase for pensioners with an income below 2000 euros, and the abolition of all taxation and submission to social security contributions on overtime.

In fact, there is not even an increase in the minimum wage, but an advance on an additional bonus paid by the budget subject to resources.

What is spectacular is that there is no questioning of this government's class policy, no questioning of the 40 billion paid by the state budget to companies through the CICE (tax credit for employers), nor of all the tax policies for the benefit of the richest. No questioning of the distribution of wealth against which yellow jackets, the working classes most affected by austerity policies, are rebelling.

Many issues will be on the table in the coming days. The government hopes it has put out the fire and is counting on the yellow jackets crumbling and being isolated. Everything will depend on maintaining the mobilization, with democratic structure at the grassroots level; on the junction with and mobilization of other layers, in neighbourhoods, workplaces, through the social movements: to make sure that the mobilization is maintained, to avoid division despite the media barrage calling for the movement to back down, despite the silence of the confederal union leaders who have been overtaken by a major social movement, in order to achieve a generalized fightback against Macron and his policy.

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[1] The state sector in France numbers about 5 million and includes healthworkers and teachers.

[2] The prefecture is the office of the Ministry of the Interior for each *département*.