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**France**

# **Gilets Jaunes still fighting**

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**For the last six months, the *Gilets Jaunes*** in France have been demonstrating in cities, giving out leaflets at roundabouts, blocking distribution centres and occupying motorway tollbooths. They have been protesting for 24 consecutive Saturdays since 17 November 2018. (Hence the appellation “Acte (number in Roman numerals)”. Saturday 4 May was “Acte XXV”.)

The spark that set alight this movement was a proposal from President Macron to increase the tax on diesel, allegedly to combat climate change. In fact, only a small proportion of this tax is used for a transition to clean energy. This second rise in fuel tax in a year caused outrage as 70% unfortunately have to travel to work by car, most of which are diesel, as, outside of large cities, public transport is inadequate. The fact that it coincided with a reduction in wealth tax added insult to injury.

The spontaneous mobilisation, launched by a few people on social media, caught everybody by surprise, including the left and the trade-unions. The *Gilets Jaunes* are mainly working in badly paid and temporary jobs, relying on gradually reducing welfare benefits, and having to resort to food banks. They are on the fringes of society and politics, and the traditional political parties and trade-unions have been unable to reach out to them and improve their conditions.

The far right initially tried to get a hearing amongst the *Gilets Jaunes*, believing it to be an “anti-state” movement receptive to racist views. Small employers gave local *Gilets Jaunes* their support as they were also being hit by the fuel tax rise. Much of Left was suspicious, seeing the *Gilets Jaunes* as a petty-bourgeois movement similar to that of right-wing populist “Poujadisme” of the 1950s which defended the self-employed, shop keepers and small businesses. But a mass movement takes a dynamic of its own, and those participating in the actions rapidly became politicised.

Meeting every Saturday on roundabouts and elsewhere, the *Gilets Jaunes* developed a social solidarity amongst themselves as they exchanged their experiences of hardship. These mobilisations have become a political and social forum. People who were previously living and working in isolation, without the framework of a trade union or any other form of collective organisation, are now developing their own social networks. By occupying the toll booths of privatised motorways and allowing drivers to exit without paying, the *Gilets Jaunes* were protesting at the corruption of privatisation. They were making the point that each year, €4.5 billion of profits from these companies are given out in dividends. If nationalised, this money could pay for free public transport in all cities in France.

As the struggle continued, so did the politicisation of the *Gilets Jaunes*. Their demands went far beyond just cancelling the rise in fuel tax, and now are for social and economic justice to meet their basic needs, as well as opposition to neoliberalism, for democracy and for tackling the climate emergency. This is evident in the decisions taken by the second national assembly of the *Gilets Jaunes* on 5-7 April in St Nazaire. Over 800 people in 235 delegations adopted resolutions for solidarity across Europe, for real democracy and citizens’ assemblies, for an ecological transition, as well as a general appeal which reads:

*We demand a general increase in wages, pensions and benefits, as well as public services for all. Our solidarity in the struggle goes especially to the nine million people who live below the poverty line. Aware of the environmental emergency, we believe it is same logic and the same struggle to stop the end of the world, and to survive at the end of the month. ... We invite all those who want to put an end to the commodification of life to enter into a conflict with the current system, in order to create together, by all means necessary, a new social, ecological and popular movement. With the multiplication of current struggles, it is incumbent on us to seek unity of action. We call for a*

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*collective fight at all levels of the country to obtain the satisfaction of our social, fiscal, ecological and democratic demands. Aware that we have to fight a global system, we consider that we must get out of capitalism.*

The far right tried to get a foothold in the movement without success. The *Gilets Jaunes* established their independence from political organisations and their demands have become more radical, challenging the system itself. While initially sceptical, the Left is now backing the movement. The Communist Party and Melenchon's France Insoumise offered places for individual *Gilets Jaunes* on their slates for the European elections, but few have taken up this offer. However, the left and the trade-unions are joining their demonstrations on Saturdays.

On 1 May, over 200,000 across France joined the CGT, Solidaires, Communist Party, NPA and others in united demonstrations with the *Gilets Jaunes* against the government. More united mobilisations are expected on the 9 May when there is a strike by public sector workers. Further ahead, the G7 meeting at the end of August in Biarritz could become another focal point.

Macron's strategy has been one of repression and the refusal of any substantial concessions. Back in December he offered the movement a national dialogue and delaying the implementation of some measures. However there was no concessions on the major issues raised by the *Gilets Jaunes* such as raising the minimum wage, stopping the "reforms" of pensions and public services, restoring the tax on wealth or significant steps to deal with the climate emergency.

In a two hour televised press conference at the end of April to announce the results of the consultation, Macron stated that his neoliberal policies were correct and that he will not be deflected from pursuing and intensifying them. The *Gilets Jaunes* answered that they did not struggle so hard just to get so little.

On another front, the government repression of the movement has been escalating with some demonstrations banned and the extensive use of arrests and violence. Over 2,200 have been injured, some seriously – five have lost a hand and 22 an eye – by the widespread use of plastic bullets by the police. Nearly 9,000 demonstrators have been arrested, with over 2,000 convicted, 40% of whom have been sent to prison. The police are also targeting journalists to restrict their ability to report the events. Over 350 of them have signed a declaration denouncing the intimidation, aggression, threats and destruction of equipment by the police.

The *Gilets Jaunes* are not going away and Macron has been unable to defuse or defeat the movement. If at their peak in November they were 500,000, they are still able to muster between 30,000 and 50,000 every Saturday since then. No mean achievement in keeping up a mobilisation. They still enjoy popular support with over 50% backing them – despite the media and the government accusing them of violence and disruption. Meanwhile Macron is discredited as he is clearly seen as a President for the rich, with his poll rating dropping to 30%.

What was originally expected to be a sprint has now turned out to be a marathon. The *Gilets Jaunes* have not lost their determination and they are in no mood to give up.

2 May 2019

Source: [Socialist Resistance](#).

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