

France: Yellow Jackets and labour movement at a crossroads - Social and political questions

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A look back at the year 2018. The emergence of the Yellow Jackets was first and foremost an expression of the rejection of tax injustice, crystallized in the rejection of the new fuel tax, which everyone has since understood was intended only to finance the compensation in the 2019 budget for employer social security contribution exemptions.

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The mobilization of the Yellow Jackets is not an expression of marginality, of social disintegration. On the contrary, the vast majority of people at the roundabouts are wage-workers, because behind the smoke curtain of the “middle class” category, 60% of public and private employees earn less than 2,000 euros net per month. Single-parent families are particularly affected, and this is one of the reasons for the very high proportion of women among the Yellow Jackets.

Outside the labour movement

It is neither a single-issue movement nor that of a particular group of employees in a region or profession. Tax increases have been the detonator across the country for those who live in the same areas and often share previous social ties. Social networks and media coverage through the major news channels did the rest.

While being a mobilization of workers, pensioners and exploited people, targeting the State and raising the question of the distribution of wealth, the protest was built totally outside the labour movement, its trades unions and political parties. It is a sign of the loss of credibility of this workers' movement, of the consequences of social democratic management of austerity, which places it on the side of the bosses and not of the solutions, and also of the trade union movement's loss of effectiveness in defending the living conditions of workers. Without making it a general rule, few yellow jackets are unionized and many (like nearly half of all employees) work in SMEs, where the union weight and the strength of collective action are very low.

The movement has a political fact in its baggage: the real weight of the extreme right-wing vote among wage-workers. But, beyond the various actual racist and homophobic acts, the targets Yellow Jackets focused on as responsible for their situation are neither immigrants nor civil servants, diversions pushed by the extreme right.

This movement has focused on what unifies it, the rejection of tax injustice, and dismisses what divides it, particularly racism. Even the campaign against the Marrakech Pact in recent weeks has slid over on the movement without succeeding in hanging on.

But to highlight its social demands, the movement challenges the State by avoiding confrontation with employers in general, even considering VSE (very small enterprises) as victims of big companies.

Warmer social climate

The movement has certainly not succeeded, beyond the very broad sympathy it has received, in bringing together the working classes of the suburbs and urban centres around it in action. Yet it has changed the balance of forces.

Macron thought that with his victory over the railway workers that there would be no more obstacles to the implementation of his ultraliberal agenda. This is no longer the case. The employers quickly put aside, in silence, their attack against the payment of overtime for truck drivers. Similarly, the warming social climate has enabled the employees of the Hyatt luxury hotel to win some of their demands. [1]

But, at the same time, the vast majority of the trade union movement did not want to set off alongside the Yellow Jackets, and push the advantage, not only to put forward their demands, but above all to create the balance of power to achieve the general demands on wages (indexation, general increase) or the abolition of the CICE. However, it is this joint action for wages and making Macron bend in his policy in the service of the capitalists that is still on the agenda, and this from the first weeks of January.

If conditions are still present, with the extension of the actions of the Yellow Jackets, convergence can only come from below, as has begun to happen in many demonstrations in different cities, and in the involvement of social movement activists among the Yellow Jackets.

The challenge of political issues

The proclaimed “apolitism” of the Yellow Jackets expressed the rejection of the political mechanisms of “representative democracy”. This movement is the result of decades of governments breaking every link in the chain by which the state maintained a certain social consensus, and thus respect for institutions and politicians. The open crisis of social democracy and the Republicans, the election of Macron itself, are the consequences of this process.

The first expression of this rejection is the refusal of representation, or of delegation within the Yellow Jackets. This has not prevented, in recent weeks, the beginning of structuring to organize actions and demands. Obviously, the action and words of the Yellow Jackets are directly political, but cannot yet be integrated into institutional frameworks.

Nevertheless, the emphasis on the Citizens’ Initiative Referendum (RIC) testifies to the illusions in the possibility of influencing institutional mechanisms with a few well-placed blows. The experience of the European Constitutional Treaty or the rigged consultation of the NDDL are however there to prove the contrary. On the other hand, the present demand for democracy may be rich in other developments if the movement is maintained in the form of local popular assemblies stimulating militant action to impose choices corresponding to social needs.

This democratic aspiration, even if it does not find an outlet, will not be resolved by “digesting” the yellow jackets, regardless of the individual career desires of some leaders.

But, like social issues, political issues are an open issue at this stage of the movement. If it were to end at the beginning of this year, not only would it be more difficult for other mobilizations relays to develop in different sectors, but the only outlet for politics would once again become the electoral system, either in negative terms through abstention or through a match between the France Insoumise and the NF, from which the latter would benefit.

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- IVP, 12 January 2019:
<http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article5892>
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Footnotes

- [1] See *Archy news nety*, 23 December 2018 [“Victory for the maids of the Hyatt Paris Vendôme”](#).