

Interview

# Report from Paris: The “Yellow Vest” Revolt - Mobilizing New Layers Against Macron

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## Interview with John Mullen

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### 1 Could you summarize the Yellow Vests movement happening in France right now?

John Mullen - Two weeks ago, starting from an online petition denouncing an increase in tax on petrol and diesel planned for January 1<sup>st</sup>, a broad network of citizens, for whom this was the last straw, set up hundreds of road blocks at the access to motorways, hypermarkets or oil depots. There were well over 150 000 demonstrators around the country on the 17<sup>th</sup> November, with over 2 000 demos or roadblocks.

Still as I write there are plenty of road blocks around, and motorway toll booths occupied so cars can go through for free, and the petition is close to a million signatures. Yellow Vests have been talking of a new May 68.

A national demonstration called in Paris on Saturday 24<sup>th</sup> November refused to assemble in the space the police had chosen for it and preferred to march up the Champs Elysées towards the presidential palace. Huge amounts of tear gas and water cannon were turned on them, and some barricades were erected in response. Burning barricades on the Champs Elysées meant the protest hit front pages across the world.

All drivers in France must carry hi-vis vests in their cars in case of accidents and the vest became a handy symbol. Demonstrators write slogans on the vests to show their particular priorities.

Over three quarters of the population now support the protest (95% among radical Left sympathizers, 56% of managers, 83% of manual and low-grade office workers, even 59% among those who voted Macron in the first round of the presidentials, and around 95% of those who voted Le Pen). The president's popularity rates, which were already very low, have hit rock bottom.

Macron is scared. He has been obliged to make a major speech on ecology orientated as a reaction to the new movement. He declared he regretted that political leaders did not listen to people enough, and made minor concessions, promising that if the price of oil rose again on the world market, taxes on fuel would be reduced. He refused to back down on the symbolic January tax rise, and 80% of citizens who listened, according to a poll, said they were not convinced.

The Prime Minister, Edouard Philippe, has said he is ready to meet delegates from the Yellow Vests

on Friday, at the same time as insisting that the minimum wage will not be increased.

**2. At first sight, a protest for cheaper petrol sounds like a fairly middle class, and possibly anti-environmental campaign. Who is affected by the new taxes and who is protesting?**

If the middle class were to mobilize in their interests and against those of big capital, we would naturally need to support them, but in fact the most active people, staffing the roadblocks, are generally working class, from the smaller towns, many of them retired, most of them new to political activity. There are also self-employed and other “middle class” participants.

Just like the “Up all night” (Nuit Debout) movement last year moved lots of young adults in the big towns into an unstructured protest movement, so the yellow vest movement is mobilizing new layers against Macron.

The rise in taxation on fuel was the spark to the movement. It is not one of the privileges of Left activists to choose what issue will spark a movement.

It is crucial to understand that we are talking about sales taxes. These are the most socially unjust of taxes since they represent a far higher proportion of income for poorer sections of the population. This is why in most European countries over the last 50 years, neoliberal governments have been reducing income tax (which is a socially fairer system) and increasing sales tax.

In France, Macron has just recently abolished a fortune tax which was only paid by the richest; at the same time, he increased taxes on retirement pensions for everyone. The latest announcements of more tax on fuel “because of the environment” was the last straw for many.

This was made worse by the release this week of government internal papers saying in so many words that the “ecological taxes” were not going to be used for any purpose connected with the environment, but simply to make up for tax cuts for the better-off.

This protest is about rising poverty. Being an unstructured movement, many slogans and demands have been put forward, but among the most popular are “Macron must resign” “Reduce all sales taxes”, “Increase the minimum wage”, a call for a “people’s assembly” and the increased use of referendums in political life.

It is particularly pathetic for Macron to claim the tax rise on fuel is for ecological reasons, as he has been continuing the closing down of local railway lines (8 000km more are due to be closed soon), and fiercely slashing funding for municipal and regional governments who run public transport.

He is also organizing the closing down of the social housing programmes which allow lower-paid employees to live near their workplaces. Meanwhile the huge oil companies pay very little tax, and kerosene fuel for aeroplanes is not subject to VAT, or indeed to any tax at all!

**3. Some people outside France believe that the French are protesting all the time. Is this true? If so, is anything different this time?**

Well, we do occasionally go to work. But seriously, I am proud to say that people squeezed or crushed by the juggernauts of maximal profit often do not take it lying down in France. The reason that, despite many attacks, working conditions, labour protection, and pensions have regressed less than in other similar countries is because we’re always protesting. Turning protest into revolution is the key question of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Europe.

**4. It’s not so long since French president Emmanuel Macron was lauded as the saviour of**

## **French capitalism. What has happened?**

Many supporters of capitalism are rather feeble-minded, and saw Macron's sharp suits and fast-talking as optimistic signs of a real chance to save French capitalism for the maximization of profit, by mobilizing a "neither right nor left" New Common Sense. But they forgot the French spirit of revolt.

Macron became president because of the collapse of traditional forces of social democracy and of the Gaullist right. Although he only got 24% of the vote in the first round of the presidentials he was able to gather together enough rats leaving the sinking parties of the left and right to put forward a new party and get a clear majority in the parliament.

For thirty years or more, neoliberal attacks have cut into workers lives considerably more slowly than in countries like Britain. French bosses are desperate for an acceleration. University is still almost free, and poverty among pensioners and unemployed is lower than in Britain, while workers contract conditions are much better. Both right and left governments, though they reduced pensions and weakened union rights, failed to go far enough and fast enough to please the bosses.

Macron is one of the bosses' last cards. This is why he was able to win against a long and powerful strike of railway workers last Spring: the bosses were prepared to support Macron while he waited out a long strike, even though they lost a great deal of money in the process. With previous governments, they had been less patient.

### **5. Many people have worries that the far right is taking part in the protests. Some argue that the Left should on principle not take part. What do you say to such arguments?**

If you have a protest made up of people generally new to politics, working class people from small towns in particular, there will be far right people among them. Fascist candidate Marine Le Pen got ten and a half million votes at the presidential election last year – every big movement has some of these people in it.

Although it is understandable that left people are worried by this, and it does need to be debated, in France today, refusing to take part in a movement because there are far right people involved is to abandon all mass social change. On the contrary, we need to show the people who vote far right that Le Pen and her millionaire family are liars and frauds.

Le Pen and some other far right figures have been expressing support for the Yellow Vests, but they will soon stop when clearly working-class demands are included. The far right is very well represented among small businessmen, who are not going to be supporting a rise in the minimum wage, and so on.

The influence of the far right on the movement is being exaggerated: this exaggeration is in the interests of Macron. His ministers have been saying « this is a far-right movement », and concluding that the only way to be against fascism ... is to support Macron!

Far right activists have been thrown out of the movement in a few places, and elsewhere, (where I live for example) it is the people from the France Insoumise or other Left groups who are the main organizers. It is very varied. Among the hundred arrested in Paris last Saturday, there were no activists from any party.

### **6. There is talk of sexist and racist behaviour on the protests. Is this true and how have people reacted?**

Yes, it's true. There were hundreds of blockades and several shocking instances of racism and sexism have been reported. In one incident, protestors even handed illegal immigrants who were hidden in a lorry over to the police. All this is unsurprising in such a racist and sexist society. The left reaction must not be to refuse support to the yellow vest movement, nor to ignore racist incidents.

There have been a number of healthy antiracist responses. A spokesperson for the movement who was close to the RN (Rassemblement National, previously the Front National) was thrown out. One of the two spokespersons who were invited to a discussion with the Minister of the Environment was a Black woman, and some radical Black organizations from the Paris suburbs have called to join the yellow vest protests in Paris on the 1<sup>st</sup> December.

In Montpellier, the Yellow Vest demonstration enthusiastically welcomed a large feminist demonstration against sexual violence which was happening, by coincidence, the same day. It is when people move into action that their racist and sexist ideas can be more easily challenged and changed.

**7. At the same time, there are reports of a large number of women being involved in the protests. Is this true? If so, could you explain why?**

Over the last thirty years in France, the involvement of women in the leadership of social movements of all kinds has been on the rise, whether it be movements for public services, for better working conditions, against islamophobia, in favour of refugee rights or whatever. Recent student movements have seen a particularly high number of women in the leadership.

All this is the result of decades of struggle for respect for active political women. So it is not surprising to see women very much present in this new movement.

**8. The protests seem at the moment to strictly reject parties. How have left parties, like your own organisation France Insoumise reacted?**

The rejection of parties is nowhere near as strong as it has been in some other movements: there is not open hostility to party activists, although most yellow vest local leaders will say « we are not party political », and demonstrations often ask for no political banners or placards.

The France Insoumise is not a party, but a political movement (with all the advantages and disadvantages that this involves). Like other radical Left groupings such as the New Anticapitalist Party, the FI leadership was initially prudent about the movement as it gradually gained momentum and it became clearer what sort of demands were involved.

So, as the weeks went by, the discourse went from « these protests show justified anger » to « we hope it is a success » to « our members should join in ». A similar trajectory was seen in the main left trade union federation, the CGT.

**10. The trade union federation the CGT is now calling for a day of action on 1 December. Why are they doing this and how will this affect the struggle?**

The CGT leadership see that rising poverty is a class issue, and also that the Yellow Vests are extremely popular. Fortunately, then, rather than applaud from the sidelines, they are calling major demos. The Yellow Vests are also calling a day of action the same day.

In Paris, the Yellow Vest demo will probably be in a separate part of town to the union demo, but in a number of towns convergence will be very likely. In Orleans, for example, and in Corsica, there is a

joint demonstration decided by representatives of the yellow vests and the regional CGT.

### **11. What must the movement do to keep its momentum and to win significant reforms?**

The situation is changing every day, and I'm afraid I left my crystal ball on the train. This kind of movement rises very fast and can also disappear very fast. Obviously the more broad working-class slogans like a rise in the minimum wage are brought forward, the better, and joint demonstrations can only help.

Oil refineries are on strike this week for higher wages, so convergence is possible there too. If reduction in taxes (vaguely defined) was the central demand, this could be problematic as Macron is very skilled at "tax cuts" which benefit the rich more and are used as an excuse to cut public services.

It is also important to mention the particular situation in the French Overseas Territory of Reunion Island, in the Indian Ocean, where 40% of the population live below the poverty line. The Yellow Vest movement has become practically insurrectionary there, and far more profound and widespread than in Metropolitan France.

It has already won a three-year freeze on fuel tax rises there, and more money for public services, and the Minister for Overseas Territories has been flown out to the island in the hope of calming the situation.

**John Mullen**

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<https://thefleftberlin.wordpress.com/current-debates/macron-and-the-yellow-vest-revolt-report-from-paris/>

- John Mullen is an anticapitalist activist living in the Paris region since the 1980s. He is a member of the anticapitalist network Ensemble and a supporter of the France Insoumise.