

France: Macron must go: Yellow Vests Act V

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The movement brought anger to the streets again across France in defiance of state efforts to divide and disrupt it this week, reports Susan Ram

Gilets jaunes (GJs) in their tens of thousands were [out on the streets again](#) across France on December 15, their fifth consecutive Saturday of action. Concerted state efforts to bring down the curtain on *Act V: Macron Démission!* (Macron Resign!) fell well short of the mark, while generating new levels of anger and defiance among protestors.

Rallies and marches were particularly militant and combative outside Paris: in big urban conurbations such as Bordeaux, Toulouse, Lyons, Marseilles, Montpellier and Nantes, and also in smaller regional centres like Brest, Limoges and Rodez.

In the capital, thousands of protestors were physically prevented from entering the city by a police and security *cordon sanitaire* which blocked vehicles at tolls and entry points. Abetted by the mainstream media, including TV channels beaming images of an apparently deserted Champs-Élysées, the interior ministry put out the story that demonstrator numbers were significantly down: an across-France total of 33,000 was put out at midday, roughly 50 per cent down on the comparable figure they gave for [Act IV on December 8](#). Thousands of posts by irate GJs on social media challenged the credibility of this line, both in terms of the ‘statistics’ invoked and of the wilful concealment of the all-out blocking operation still in progress.

Act V took place after a week which saw the French state mount its most determined effort yet to undermine the movement of the Gilets Jaunes. Three distinct if interwoven strands to this are apparent. Firstly, a charm offensive of sorts by President Emmanuel Macron, aimed at disarming the movement through the dangling of concessions. Secondly, appeals to protestors to stand down on the grounds of national unity, including attempts by the state to weaponise the shootings at Strasbourg on December 11 to this end. Thirdly, a sustained show of force designed to physically prevent mass assemblies of GJs and undermine morale.

Despite some wobbling on the part of a few self-appointed ‘spokespersons’ of the movement and within reformist sections of the trade union movement such as the CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labour), overall this strategy seems to have made little headway. It seems to be intensifying anger among GJs while failing to undermine the high level of public support they command.

Few in the country seem to have been persuaded by Macron’s ‘concessions’, revealed on December 10 during his Jupiterian take on a ‘fireside chat’: a televised address to the nation from one of the most extravagantly ornate chambers of the Élysée Palace. Predictably, the heart-to-heart began with a headmaster-style ticking-off of all preceding naughtiness, along with a declaration of intent to bear down hard on ‘violence’ and disruption.

The concessions, when they came, seemed on the face of it rather feeble: a modest rise in the minimum wage; a promise to make overtime pay tax-free from 2019; a request “to all employers who

can” to pay workers an end-of-year bonus; the withdrawal of a planned tax increase for pensions below 2,000 euros per month. As for restoring the wealth tax, which Macron abolished very early on in his presidency, well that couldn’t be done: it would simply drive investors overseas. However, the government would make fresh efforts to curb tax evasion and ‘unwarranted earnings’.

Two elements in Macron’s address merit particular concern. Firstly, his inclusion of the phrase “laïcité bousculée” (‘secularism buffeted or overturned’) in his analysis of the ills of current French society. Secondly, his reference to the ‘profound identity’ of the nation and the need, in this context, to ‘tackle’ the question of immigration. Both comments seem suggestive of an effort to inject racist and xenophobic themes into the GJ movement, the better to divide it while simultaneously making it appear that the state is listening to right-wing grievances.

Events in Strasbourg just a day later opened up further opportunities in this direction. The killing of four people, and injuring of a dozen or so others, by a lone radicalised Islamist gunman at the city’s popular Christmas market predictably became grist to state efforts to undermine and divide the GJ uprising. A sequence of senior government ministers and regional officials called on protestors to call a halt, optimistically invoking the ‘exhaustion’ of the security forces as an argument likely to melt the hearts of GJs subjected to baton charges, tear gas, rubber bullets and more. The education minister, Jean-Michel Blanquer, expressed his horror at “vile” social media posts suggesting the government had exaggerated (or worse) the Strasbourg attack in order to deflect attention away from the protest movement. On cue, the mainstream media plunged into a smear-the-protestors feeding frenzy.

While it remains difficult to gauge the impact of state efforts to rein in and disrupt the GJ movement, certain elements need highlighting.

Firstly, the anger and defiance on display across France during Act V on December 15 suggests the movement is holding fast to its mobilising capacity, despite the multiple obstacles placed in its way. In city and town centres across France, the run-up to Christmas 2018 carries the distinctive, all-pervasive scent of tear gas. Saturday shoppers confront streets that may be smoke-filled, semi-boarded up, irrigated by water cannon and primed for running battles between protestors and riot police.

This is a situation in which nothing can be predicted, and nothing seems ruled out. In Bordeaux on December 15, a student march in protest against the government’s raising of university fees for overseas students melded effortlessly into a GJ mobilisation of more than 4,000 protestors. In Toulouse, skirmishes between GJs and security personnel enlivened the city centre in the now familiar context of tear gas, water cannon and armed military vehicles poised to strike; simultaneously, a separate mobilisation blocked traffic on the périphérique (the city’s motorway ring). The thousands who marched through Marseille did so behind a banner declaring ‘France is not for sale!’ In Nantes, barricades were erected on tramway lines; the Christmas market closed early, at 3pm; the stench of tear gas lingered in the air.

On top of this, concerted strike action across several industries has been called by France’s more militant trade union confederations — the CGT, the FSU, Solidaires and UNEF — to press for “an immediate increase in salaries, pensions and social protection.” The CGT has issued a statement denouncing Macron’s ‘concessions’ as mere “smoke and mirrors” and incapable of tackling austerity. It seeks to channel the grievances of the GJs into its new action, “so that this anger transforms into a powerful movement that allows us to make real social advances.” Air traffic control is among the sectors likely to be affected, along with public transport and education.

This is the context in which Macron’s increasingly frenzied efforts to disable and disarm the GJs

should be understood. On the one hand, renewed and intensified displays of force, in evidence in Paris and across the land on December 15. On the other, concessions; Santa Claus offers of seasonal baubles, promises to listen and 'do better'. Hence the hurried summons of more than a hundred business leaders to the Élysée Palace on December 12, where Macron exhorted them to cut him some slack by giving their employees tax-free end-of-year bonuses. Companies including Orange, Michelin, Publicis and Altice have already complied, while banks have agreed not to raise household taxes in 2019. Word also has it that companies may be required to pay more in tax as Macron scrambles to keep his budget deficit within the EU's 3 percent limit.

Whatever its future course of action, whatever its ability to sustain momentum and build its forces, the Gilets Jaunes movement has already dealt stout blows to Project Macron. It has forced Macron to back down, and not only on his planned fuel tax rises. It has placed at least a temporary brake on his business-friendly agenda, just as it has thrown a spanner into works regarding French compliance with full-spectrum neoliberalism, as decreed on high by the European Union.

Out on the streets, and across the multiple social media sites that constitute the organisational lifeblood of the Gilets Jaunes movement, the mood is one of defiance, anger and determination. As one activist put it in a post, "We're more than ever in a position of strength! The police are exhausted, commerce is starting to sound alarm bells, and Christmas is fast approaching - and the government asks the gilets jaunes to stop?! It's for Macron to step aside. As for us, we must never give way, never concede!"

Susan Ram

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