

# Forms of struggle: The Gilets Jaunes Have Changed How France Thinks About Strikes

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**Last winter, yellow-vested protestors blockaded roads and roundabouts across France, building a social revolt outside of classic labor-movement structures. Today, the trade unions are back at the center of the fight against Emmanuel Macron's pension reforms. Yet the spontaneity and militancy that drove the gilets jaunes are again at the heart of the struggle.**

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It's now over a year since the gilets jaunes movement rocked France, as yellow-vested protesters occupied roundabouts and blocked roads in response to a planned fuel tax hike. Embracing a wider array of cost-of-living and democratic demands, the gilets jaunes protests particularly expressed the hardships of small-town and peripheral France, uniting working people outside the traditional structures of the labor movement.

While the gilets jaunes protests no longer attract the same numbers as last winter, Emmanuel Macron's pensions reform has today sparked a no less impressive movement, involving record-long strikes. This has widely been understood as a return to strength for trade unionism and more classic forms of social struggle. Yet as Lucie Delaporte writes for Mediapart, today the forms of popular resistance are not just the same as what they were before the gilets jaunes took to the streets.

The time for roundabout occupations, the setting-up of shacks and wildcat demonstrations is over. With the mobilizations against the pensions reform, December has seen the return of more traditional forms of social movement, including the great marches from Place de la République to Place de la Nation in Paris.

Jean-Michel Denis, an expert on trade union mobilizations, emphasizes that "Here we find a mobilization taking up a classic workplace framework, in response to what is itself a classic type of reform." For the sociologist, "At the formal level, we have national days of action, a more or less common front of the trade unions, large demonstrations and a series of [government] negotiations with trade union representatives."

Yet the gilets jaunes mobilization — a movement which was, at first, notably marked by its distrust toward the trade unions — has radically changed the picture. The unions, for their part, are well-aware that huge expectations have been raised in terms of achieving social justice — and that it would be dangerous indeed to disappoint them.

On Saturday December 28, around 300 gilets jaunes set off from the Place de la Bourse, in the heart of the capital, with placards proclaiming “the pivot age is a death date” — here referring to the “balance age” the government plans to set for the full pension age in 2027, with premiums and penalties [designed to make workers stay on] until age sixty-four. They then converged with the thousands-strong march that headed from the Gare du Nord, called by regional unions belonging to various federations.

“The trade unions have a lot at stake in this matter,” claims Luc Rouban, a researcher at Sciences-Po’s Political Research Center (Cevipof). He emphasizes that “trust in the unions and such forms of social dialogue remains very weak, in the main. In strategic terms, if [the unions] accept small technical amendments [to Macron’s reform] they will show that they are not able to maintain the same level of opposition as the gilets jaunes did. And as we again find in the marches today, this opposition had strong anti-capitalist accents.”

The stakes are even higher for union leaderships because over recent months their base became often strongly implicated in the gilets jaunes movement. After the initial distrust had passed, many deep links were forged: “In the current mobilization we see that the gilets jaunes and the unions are less incompatible than we might have imagined,” insists Samuel Hayat, a historian of the labor movement. He today observes “the exchanging of modes of action, on the basis of the closer ties built on the ground. This translates into more spontaneous, more direct actions.”

### **No Warnings Given**

Take the case of the strike at the TGV train maintenance center at Châtillon — an action launched without warning during the All Saints’ holidays [the school half-term in late October], which succeeded in blocking up the rail traffic for the whole of western France. According to researcher Laurent Jeanpierre, author of *In girum: Les leçons politiques des ronds-points*, this strike was exemplary of “post-gilets jaunes” trade union actions.

“You don’t declare an action, just as you don’t declare you’re going to demonstrate, as you’re counting on the surprise effect. Since institutional struggles don’t pay off, I think this repertoire [of actions] will be generalized,” argues Jeanpierre. He emphasizes that “today, [the CGT trade union federation’s general secretary Philippe] Martinez can’t do exactly as he pleases. Before December 5 [strike day] he said that he was prepared to negotiate — but his base pulled him into line.” The researcher underlines that the union’s base has been ready to do battle since September — and determined to hold out for the long haul “independently of the union leadership’s own calendar.”

“The boundaries of the acceptability of violence have shifted. Today, it is more complicated for union organizations to condemn violence, especially considering the police violence in front of them,” continues Jeanpierre. For him, the impact of the gilets jaunes mobilization is also to be understood in terms of a relocalization of social conflict. “My hypothesis is that there will be a shift toward more local arenas. On December 5 there were 245 sites of mobilization — that is, two or three per département. I see this as a legacy of the [gilets jaunes] movement, which was very decentralized and fragmented across the territory. Today, we can say a demonstration isn’t made up of buses to Paris.”

According to police, more than 30,000 people marched in Toulouse on December 5; the unions claimed 100,000. Police figures moreover cited 25,000 marchers in Marseilles, 20,000 in Lyons and in Bordeaux, and 13,000 in Lille. For the sociologist “People are getting used to street mobilization again in places where there weren’t — or had no longer been — demonstrations.” This is something also described by many gilets jaunes interviewed in recent days.

Pierre-Gaël Laveder, a France Insoumise militant with a CFDT union card, involved in the gilets jaunes in Montceau-les-Mines right from the outset, reports how “On Tuesday, December 17, we decided to demonstrate in the manner of the gilets jaunes, blocking up a whole area. We stayed on one same street for two and a half hours.” Before that, he explains, the local gilets jaunes had distributed 8,000 leaflets, “an enormous number for a town of 18,000 people, and incomparably greater than what the unions did. Moreover, the turnout was a record for this town. There were 600 of us against [François Hollande’s 2016] Labour Law, but this time there were almost 1,600 people.”

## **A Yellow-Vested Strike**

From slogans and songs to graffiti, a great deal of signs have underlined the particular creativity of the demonstrations these last few weeks — in part inspired by the gilets jaunes’ struggle. On the night of December the gilets jaunes general assembly in Belleville was jubilant. And in the mobilization it saw a liberation of the social movement from the central union leaderships.

In a text published on its Facebook page, the collective enthusiastically spoke of a “Yellow-Vested Strike. That was the beautiful surprise this Thursday December 5.” It described marches where “school and university students, teachers, workers, the unemployed, and strikers marching outside of the union blocs shouted their heads off with gilet jaune slogans. And, as a further surprise, even in the union bloc finally reaching the Place de La Nation with its balloons at 8 PM (having set off from the Gare de l’Est six hours earlier!) we heard the classic chants of the gilets jaunes, starting with “Ré-vo-lu-tion!”

Historian Ludivine Bantigny, author of *Révolution* — who has closely followed the gilets jaunes movement over the last year — has also recognized the “particular creativity” on the mobilizations of recent days.

“The slogans, the chants, are very joyous,” Bantigny emphasizes. Nonetheless, she makes clear that this inventiveness is not, in itself, “wholly new,” and follows in the same vein as the earlier mobilizations against pension reforms in 1995, 2003, and 2010, where the “interprofessional” dimension — uniting workers across different workplaces and sectors — was already very strong. “Today a tradition is being reactivated. And I would not want anyone to counterpose the creativity of the gilets jaunes to the supposed old-fashionedness of the trade unions. They did not arrive on an empty field,” she makes clear.

Wearing his two “hats” as both a gilet jaune and trade union rep, Laveder also wants to qualify the oft-made assertion that the gilets jaunes won more than all the trade union struggles of recent years had. “Firstly, we should remember that this was a ‘one-off’ response. There were the announcements in December [the set of concessions Macron made on December 10, 2018] but after that there was nothing else. And we cannot compare this with what the unions have won over the last 120 years.”

## **Energized Movement**

Moreover, the gilets jaunes movement — initially so critical of the unions — also, paradoxically, allowed the renewal of these same organizations. “Many union members were also gilets jaunes, often without advertising their union affiliation. The striking thing is that union activists all say that this spurred them on again and also allowed them to reconnect with the places that they had deserted. The movement has discovered new energy,” Bantigny concludes.

That said, the tug of war that has now been engaged with the government will test whether the

unions are able to serve as the megaphone for the gilets jaunes' demands for social justice. This will, clearly, be a very different question depending on the union confederation concerned: for its part, the CFDT has long advertised its support for a points-style system [such as Macron's reform, in its own way, promotes] and its desire to "negotiate."

The Belleville group's statement doesn't beat around the bush — and shows that part of the gilets jaunes movement is determined not to see the movement betrayed. Its text insists "They are going to shaft us. Everyone, union members or not, agrees in saying that the union representatives are going to shaft us, as they usually do." It calls for the "derailing of the routine of talks with the unions, which the media and the government are trying to impose on us."

According to Ludivine Bantigny, the relationship between the unions and the gilets jaunes is sometimes marked by a "mutual sense of bitterness." As she explains, the gilets jaunes have often expressed their rejection of the bureaucracy and the compromises it makes in union negotiations.

Yet as the historian puts it, the unions have also often felt similarly about the gilets jaunes, who were often demonstrating for the first time. Trade unionists expressed "the bitterness of those who devoted part of their lives to defending workers and now say [to the gilets jaunes]: but where were you when we mobilized against the Labour Law? Where were you during the last mobilizations over pensions?"

In recent days the CFDT-Cheminots union for railworkers has itself called for the strike to continue, despite General Secretary Laurent Berger's own call for a truce. As the historian emphasizes, the criticisms which the gilets jaunes have leveled against the unions are today widely present even within the unions themselves. If more classic forms of social struggle are back on the agenda, the gilets jaunes continue to cast a shadow.

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**P.S.**

- Jacobin, 12.31.2019:  
<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/12/gilets-jaunes-strikes-trade-unions-macron>

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