

France: Paving the Way for Le Pen?

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SINCE MID-JANUARY 2023 France is experiencing its most significant wave of social movement mobilization since the heady days of May/June 1968.

Though clearly of a lesser magnitude than those of 55 years ago, the ongoing demonstrations and strikes make clear that France remains one of the most prominent terrains for frontal challenges to politics as usual.

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The issues at the heart of the conflict are simple enough. President Macron had proposed that the retirement age would need to be raised from 62 to 64, supposedly in order to avoid that the deficit would rise beyond unmanageable proportions in upcoming years.

Outside France, published opinion initially tended to concur. After all, it is true that virtually all other European countries have retirement age cut-offs that are several years higher than the comparatively low age of 62. So what's wrong with the French?

Macron's Accidental Rise

The conflict must be seen in the wider context of the rule by Emmanuel Macron since May 2017, when the Rothschild banker was elected to the presidency as a result of what was essentially a fluke.

The Socialist President François Hollande, in power up to the elections in the spring of 2017, had been chosen in 2012 on the basis of the usual vapid electoral campaign promises by social democrats, then carrying out essentially the very same neoliberal policies as his conservative predecessor Nicolas Sarkozy.

By 2017, France's Socialist Party had thus reached rock-bottom in popular appreciation, so that everyone expected the conservative challenger François Fillon to win the 2017 presidential contest.

Fillon, however, followed his fateful temptation to procure lucrative publicly-funded jobs for members of his immediate family, and the resulting scandal ensured that Fillon would not become the next President.

The former Minister of Economics for François Hollande, Emmanuel Macron, inched ahead of his closest challengers in the first round of the 2017 presidential elections with 24.01% of the vote. The far-right Marine Le Pen came in second with 21.3% of the vote, then came Fillon with 20.01%.

The key figure on the Radical Left, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, an ex-Trotskyist [*of the Lambertist wing, ESSF*] and then-head of *La France Insoumise*, obtained 19.58% of the first-round vote. Macron had thus everything but a clear head start. But the French political system mandates that only the top two vote getters may participate in the second-round run-off.

A large number of well-intentioned voters with sympathies on the Left thus voted for Macron in order to avoid that the radical right-wing Marine Le Pen would emerge as the winner. Macron thus became President with 66.10% of the popular vote in the second round, Le Pen obtaining 33.90%.

Battle Lines Drawn

And now began the seemingly irresistible rise of Macron to pole position in French politics. Never having had even the slightest link to even the mildest forms of leftwing politics, Macron now claimed popular approval for himself and his neoliberal politics — despite the obvious fact that he owed his victory to a significant extent to left-wing voters having chosen the lesser evil.

One of his very first acts as President was consequently the abolition of a token wealth tax on the richest French citizens. The battle lines thus quickly became clear.

His first altercation with France's combative labor movement happened rather quickly, when Macron decided to tackle the rail unions, who benefit from various special "privileges" in terms of pension and other provisions. The rail unions let themselves be cornered by Macron and lost this first significant battle for trade union rights under the new President.

By late autumn 2018, an entirely unprecedented social movement suddenly grabbed headline news, precisely in those regions of France where traditional trade union presence had always been sketchy at best.

In rural and small-town France, hundreds of thousands of people who live off mostly rather precarious positions of employment, often having to travel long distances in their cars to get to work as public transportation in rural France is for practical purposes non-existent, decided to hit the streets.

These quintessentially "average French" with no combative union tradition suddenly began to block major road intersections, notably the ubiquitous roundabouts (traffic circles), wearing yellow vests (*gilets jaunes*), a mandatory highway crew safety feature.

Macron, pretending to follow his self-proclaimed "ecological consciousness," had announced a number of measures which would have had the combined effect of a significant increase in gasoline prices for the average car owner.

Those French who faced increasing difficulties to survive until the end of the month, when their next paycheck might arrive, were now incensed enough to come out in huge numbers all over France, from November 2018 onwards.

By no means were all "yellow jackets" opponents of ecological measures as such; but they felt that their worries over making ends meet were at least as justified as other concerns about the end of the world due to climate change.

For more than a year, this purposefully decentralized movement periodically paralyzed French public life and defied the policy choices of the French elite.

From Blockades to Covid

Three characteristics of this epic struggle deserve to be highlighted. First and foremost, the police response was swift and brutal. More than 25,800 persons were injured by the forces of order using the full arsenal of weapons at the disposal of the French state.

Some of those weapons have been repeatedly condemned as excessively heavy by various human rights organizations, Amnesty International or the European Parliament. More than 30 protesters lost an eye, for instance, because of the resort to such armaments, which virtually no other European countries have authorized for public use against civilians for quite some time.

Second, the small-town and rural nature of most *gilets jaunes* made for an unusual combination of political opinions on the roundabouts and clover leaves of the rural interstate highway network across France.

Rural and small-town France is often a stronghold of the Radical Right. Thankfully, adherents and sympathizers of France's multifaceted thinking Left did not use the presence of sympathizers of Marine Le Pen as a convenient excuse to abstain from this epic struggle.

Thus, the *gilets jaunes* saw small-town rebels attracted by the social message of Marine Le Pen engaged in common actions and intense political discussions with left-wing activists, amongst them members of the Trotskyist NPA.

The third feature of the movement of the *gilets jaunes* was the shameful abstention of France's trade unions, who obstinately refused to engage in solidarity actions, worried about a movement that they could not tightly control, although many rank-and-file activists ignored their union bureaucrats' advice and donned "yellow jackets" themselves.

What killed the movement of the *gilets jaunes* was Covid. In mid-March 2020, Emmanuel Macron decided to combat a virus by a series of police-state methods with few parallels outside of some other southern European states with traditionally conflict-laden class relations, some Third World authoritarian regimes — and the People's Republic of China.

In several waves, for months at a time, Macron imposed a tight form of house arrest on all 67.75 million French, allowing them a maximum of 60 minutes (!) per day to leave their oftentimes cramped living quarters with little air circulation to go shopping for the necessities of life, compelled to carry an array of documents designed to ensure that no one would dare venture beyond the maximum perimeter of one thousand meters from their home address.

For people of the country hosting the Tour de France, using a bicycle to go shopping was strictly outlawed, as was swimming in a lake or the ocean, even if one lived less than one kilometer from the water's edge.

The vast forests of France, the Alps and the Pyrenees, were suddenly declared off limits to anyone, even local villagers. Infractions of these punitive measures were punished by an immediate fine of 175 euros. It was a gigantic exercise in demonstrating the powers of the state.

Even the mainstream liberal German weekly newspaper Die Zeit published articles depicting France under Macron in those long months and years as an "Authoritarian Absurdistan." Not only the movement of the *gilets jaunes*, but also the dynamic anti-climate change protesters inspired by Greta Thunberg (Fridays for Future) making inroads at the same time, were thus killed off in mid-flight.

“Make France Competitive Again”

When Macron had successfully annulled the “privileges” of rail workers in 2018, his original plan had been to generalize such moves “to make France competitive again” and thus to spread his actions against “pension privileges” to the entire population.

Macron was smart enough to put those plans on hold when he locked down France in repeat exercises of what was then even officially called “confinement” during the Covid epidemic. When Covid subsided, however, such plans were put on the front burner again — with a vengeance.

More than eighty percent of the French population reject Macron’s scheme, and this number has not diminished even after months of disruptive strikes and massive demonstrations. All the more reason for Macron to obstinately insist on passing his brutal counter-reform.

Reelected in 2022 to a second term with a much smaller majority in the second-round runoff of 58.55% to Marine Le Pen’s 41.45%, Macron, now a lame duck President, no longer had to hold back. His arrogant disdain for the proverbial average “hard-working French man and woman” had few limits.

Already during his first term in office, this pure product of the French Republic’s highly exclusive elite education in the Grandes Écoles, publicly proclaimed his likes and dislikes: “There are those who succeed; and then there are those who count for nothing.”

Macron now proudly repeated such sociological insights more regularly and on any and all occasions.

Hiding behind the thin veneer of parliamentary democracy, his reelection in 2022 had been once again assured by massive voter turnouts in his favor by leftists fearing a victory of Marine Le Pen.

Macron initially banked on parliamentary approval of his pension counter-reform, as most current MPs hail either from the Center, the Center-Right, the traditional Right or the Radical Right. With the Radical Right (Le Pen) and small portions of traditional Conservatism announcing their tactical opposition to the reform plans, Macron was no longer assured parliamentary victory.

In mid-March, he thus invoked paragraph 49.3 of the French Constitution, a clause that allows the government to decree laws without parliamentary approval, to pass his reform act.

The opposition movement, which had begun to weaken in the weeks before this fateful move, now was revitalized and experienced a rebound, with demonstrations taking on an increasingly violent tone. But at the time of writing on May 3, it appears almost certain that Macron will win this contest once again, as he’s done in all earlier rounds of his altercations with progressive social movements.

Getting Away With It

What can explain such a victory in the face of hostile public opinion and a movement which has consistently mobilized up to 3.5 million people in the streets in more than a dozen coordinated national days of action?

For one thing, the sometimes-crippling strike movements only touched certain sectors of the economy. Public transportation, energy workers, dock workers, the chemical industry and garbage collections were its strong points. Other areas of the economy and public life were only partially affected or not at all.

The movement, impressive as it was from Day One, never spread beyond these original strongholds. Unlike what happened in 1968 or in the days of the June 1936 strikes during the Popular Front, private and public life continued without major disruptions, and after some time the strikes began to lose their inner dynamic even in those sectors at the heart of the movement.

Second, the key political forces behind the strikes, France's formerly powerful Left, is deeply divided with no single figure or party emerging as a viable alternative to Macron's neoliberal course. As a result, the political current paradoxically benefiting most from the unrest is Marine Le Pen's Radical Right.

Nominally opposing the reforms, *Le Pen's Rassemblement National* in fact did very little to propagate the protest movement, and its forces are barely visible in the huge street demonstrations that accompany the strikes in irregular intervals.

They thus come across as the voice of reason in the opposition to Macron's counter reform, whereas the Left, animating the vast social movement, is frequently — wrongly! — associated with the sometimes violent tactics of the so-called Black Block, which capture front page news in the evening television and the press.

Here it is important to point to a clear and present feature of French public life for many generations in the more or less recent past. There exists a strong, seemingly perennial undercurrent of radical conservatism, rearing its ugly head at frequent points in France's turbulent history.

The collaborationist Vichy Government (under German occupation) in World War II, it is sometimes forgotten, was surprisingly popular for quite some time.

May 1968 not only witnessed barricades animated by students and a three-week general strike, but on 30 May 1968 conservative forces descended on Paris and hundreds of thousands of Gaullists marched on the Champs Elysées, demanding an end to "anarchy" — and the late June 1968 parliamentary elections presented Charles De Gaulle with his most smashing electoral victory ever.

Some recent opinion polls by respected institutions suggest that, if there were runoff elections between Macron and Le Pen right now, Marine Le Pen could win with a 55-45 margin against the current President.

Serious academic studies have also shown that the French have an unusually high appreciation of the place of labor and work in their lives, which may go to explain in part the tenacity with which the current struggle is being fought. But the same studies also repeatedly show that many of the same individuals who hold such views are also venerating authority and hierarchy.

It would be the ultimate irony if the current wave of mass demonstrations and associated strike movements triggered by Emmanuel Macron would pave the way for Marine Le Pen to ascend to the presidential palace.

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P.S.

• Against the Current No. 225, July/August 2023:

<https://againstthecurrent.org/atc225/paving-the-way-for-le-pen/>