

## YELLOW VESTS: Fueling Change in France

On the tenth consecutive week of Yellow Vests protests since November 17 French riot police went on a violent rampage as Thousands marched in **Paris, Marseille, Toulouse, Bordeaux, Rennes, Lyon, Perpignan, Clermont-Ferrand, Vitry le François** and many other parts of France. The police crackdown happened in the wake of the government's proposal for a fresh legislation to contain the allegedly unsanctioned protests. Earlier in January, French prime minister **Edouard Philippe** announced plans to draft a new legislation to punish people who hold unsanctioned protests. **He also said that 80,000 members of the security forces would be deployed for the next wave.** *The Local France* reported that the **"Disarm"** collective, a local group that campaigns against police violence, had counted 98 cases of serious injuries till now, including 15 cases of people losing eyesight to rubber bullets.

Meanwhile, French president **Emmanuel Macron** launched his **"Great National Debate"** on Tuesday, January 15. Consisting of a series of public forums that invited voters to express their concerns and hopes amid the two months of anti-government protests. But reports show that Macron's new initiative will not have the desired impact as tens of thousands are still protesting. Even though the pro-government media claims that the participation in the protests is shrinking, the ground reports say that there is no significant reduction in people's discontentment with the regime.

In the face of huge mobilizations, the government was forced to roll back the tax hike. In addition, Macron also announced tax cuts for pensioners and asked bosses to give bonuses to their workers. But these small overtures have failed to placate the anger of the working and lower middle classes. Since his inauguration, Macron has been promoting pro-austerity measures, curtailing workers rights, implementing harsh policies on immigrants and refugees in the garb of silencing ultra-right's criticisms, reducing budgets for education, etc. Workers, women, youth and students had hit the streets in the country on multiple instances. But, at every instance, Macron had shrugged off the demands raised by such groups. Amid the austerity, Macron also batted for tax cuts for big businesses in the garb of attracting investments. Meanwhile, corporate media hailed Macron as the global champion of environment and climate, who did not hesitate to increase the fuel charges and the carbon tax imposed on fossil fuels. But such a move proved to be a rupture through which all the anger and discontent in the society poured into the streets.

## ENVY THE YELLOW VESTS

While the French Yellow Vest movement began as a way for low-income people to voice their anger at the government's efforts to target car pollution with a heavy carbon tax, it has now spiraled into an ongoing, at-times violent expression of general dissatisfaction with France's political system and labor laws. This was evident when two yellow vest representatives met with France's minister of ecology and presented him with a list of demands that far exceed the movement's original scope. Amongst other things, they called for the elimination of the French Senate (which some politicians have also called for, saying the upper chamber does not represent the French population), a reduction in the salary of elected representatives, and more frequent public consultations through national and local referendums, as well as a reform of the asylum application process and an end to the government's fiscal austerity policy. Many of the Yellow Vest's demands have to do with what they view as unacceptable infringements upon their labor rights. To many workers overseas, and especially in the US, some of the demands might seem difficult to fathom. Here are a few examples:

France's pre-tax minimum wage (link in French) is €1,498.47 (\$1,701.80) a month, for a work week of 35 hours, or roughly \$11.22 an hour. In the US, the federal minimum wage is \$7.25 per hour and has not budged since 2009. A US employee working the same number of hours as a French worker (35 hours per week) would make \$1,100 per month. (Minimum wage laws vary across US states, with some cities like Seattle offering \$15 an hour.)

According to the US Census Bureau, women working full-time, year round, earned 80% of what their male counterparts earned in 2017. In France, according to the European Commission, that number is 84.8%. Macron has made the fight for gender equality the centerpiece of his administration (paywall), and has committed to reducing the gender pay gap through a set of measures, including sanctioning companies that pay men and women differently. Protestors would have him do more but haven't specified what, exactly.

French employers who hire workers between 16 and 25 years old on a short-term, full-time, or

apprenticeship contract, receive a government subsidy to help offset the costs of healthcare, pensions, and other social welfare contributions, which are unusually large (paywall) in France. The government is willing to give subsidies, tax credits, and tax exemptions worth as much as €7,000 to incentivize companies to hire young people. Previous French governments have offered to pay up to 75% of young workers' salaries for up to three years (paywall).

The US has no specific tax incentive policy at the federal level for companies that hire young people, though some companies can qualify for a Work Opportunity Tax Credit of up to \$1,200 for hiring 16 to 17 year old summer workers who reside in an Empowerment Zone or Rural Renewal County. (Some states, including New York, have put in place their own incentives for hiring youth workers.)

This one doesn't require much explanation, but context is key. The average French worker pays more taxes than the average American worker—according to the Tax Foundation, average US wage earners have a total tax burden of 31.7% of their pretax earnings, versus 37.3% for the average French wage earner. Nonetheless, the taxes French workers pay go towards funding relatively generous state pensions, free universal healthcare, one of the world's best public health systems, and inexpensive public education. That's not the case across the board in the US.

These demands highlight how the "yellow vest" movement, which began as a way to protest rising fuel prices, has expanded to cover a range of recriminations, from gender inequality to labor rights and democratic norms, so sprawling that it is unlikely Macron's government can respond satisfactorily. A stone wall separates this President of the Rich from the Yellow Vest. Will he do as Trump has done and cherry pick right wing nationalists, racists and financial elitist? Or will something new and fresh appear in France.

Something that might fire the resistance in the U.S.?



**Annabelle Timsit**  
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www.greenfuse.work



**at the Service of the Powerful,'** which speaks to the *"cold and cynical management of public affairs"* taking place at the top of the state with the arrival of the contingent headed by Macron.

In such a state of affairs, replacing Macron with another proxy of the neoliberal deep state will not yield the much needed justice and equity. The deep state, run by French billionaires, who are able to put forward their agents such as Emmanuel Macron on demand, has to be exposed and dismantled at the hands of people. Only then will the yellow vests movement, one of the largest and popular mobilizations in the history of France emerge as a truly transformative moment.

**-Muhammed Shabeer**  
peoplesdispatch.org

Cyril Benoit from **Young Communists Movement of France (MJCF)**, had told *Peoples Dispatch* that the *"Yellow vests movement is not just about fuel tax hike, it is a crystallization of a deep social discontent and distress."*

Such a crystallized discontent among the people seems inextinguishable in the near future. The ultra-right wing components in the society are trying to push the protests towards a single agenda—ousting Macron. They are also aiming for electoral dividends by channelizing the protests against refugees and immigrants, thereby polarizing the country. The enthusiasm of ultra-nationalists like **Marine Le Pen** gave Macron an excuse to crack down on the yellow vests by calling them violent, hate mongers, etc.

But the **'Left'** in France, while still unable to assume leadership of the yellow vests, is taking many efforts to orient the protest to achieve much-needed social reforms in the country. They are actively organizing mobilizations of working class, students, youth, etc., on the sidelines of the larger movement. They are aware of the fact that just replacing Macron will not solve the problems faced by the common people.

In January, books uncovering the nexus of financial enterprises run by French elites who form Macron's core support group went viral on the internet, illustrating that Macron has been handpicked by elite business groups in the country to run the government in a way that caters to their business interests. Earlier, various economists contributed to a book, titled **'The Macron Imposture—a Business Model**



## Nurture Diversity

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Speaking of the need for angelic troublemakers, a couple of weeks ago I was contacted by the women who after the controversy

covering the first march, wanted to revamp the march, including more voices from marginalized community members. In doing so, they did something very important, they decided to humble themselves, and do better after allies were called out and shamed, and rightly so, for not having representation from more diverse groups. I am glad they did, because despite past and recent failures of our allies, this showed me something that will be key in this movement towards Humboldt creating a safer place for Black people, and instead of being a place that pushes diversity out, becomes one that nourishes it. They showed humility and a willingness to admit a mistake. To connect across differences to rectify a situation that some feel is still un-rectifiable.

This is the challenge of our white allies today- to be able to admit they have made mistakes, to admit that they have not supported women of color and other minority populations in the county to the best of their ability. There are much harsher consequences than being wrong, especially for those of us who are dying and fearing for our lives and I think the humility is worth the risk. Your humility gives me hope today as the women of Humboldt County that you do have the capacity to be better allies. To join us Black people and other minorities in being the angelic troublemakers Humboldt County needs!

I saw something else that gave me hope...I saw for the first time in my life at a poetry reading white allies create a space safe enough for Black people to open up and share personal deep vulnerable things about their lives here, and unfortunately most of their narratives told of feelings of the terrorism of living here as a Black person. But the magic was that the white people held space and listened - **JUST** listened and, instead of being offended, lovingly held that space. Humboldt County did that, for a small group of Black people, but still it brought me hope that a predominantly white space was able to nurture diversity.

If we can do that on a small scale and work on creating spaces like this one today that give a voice to the voiceless...and if we can keep room in our hearts for humility, for ally-ship, for allowing Blacks to be the experts on the nuances of our own oppression and speak without fear...and if we have the courage to stand UP women's' rights, then I believe we can take a stand against the overt and covert racism that perpetuates institutional harms and hate crimes against black people in this area. If we can do that, then I believe we can begin to nourish the diverse needs of our community and help Black people to feel safer and more supported and welcomed in this community. I thank you all, and I thank you for being the angelic troublemakers that Humboldt County needs.

**-Aundrea Stuckey**

Text of a speech delivered at the Eureka Women's March, Jan. 19<sup>th</sup>