France: On tactics towards the Gilets Jaunes

Martin Suchanek, GAM Infomail 1038, 18. Januar 2018

The Gilets Jaunes (yellow vests) are spreading around Europe and gaining support and sympathy from a wide variety of political forces, from the extreme right to the radical left. This in itself is a rarity. Are either or both wings deceiving themselves? Is the movement a proof of the much-touted idea of post-politics?

Although they drew 287,000 onto the streets on their biggest mobilisation to date, on November 17, that is less than other movements of recent decades. The CPE protests (2006) and the Pension Reform (2010) both involved over 1 million, and that is to say nothing of the different level of political awareness. Even their militancy only seems greater at first glance, if, for example, riots on the Champs Elysées or road blockades are reckoned to be more important than the weeks of strikes or occupations of companies, schools and universities in March and October last year.

In France itself, the gilets jaunes have the enthusiastic support of the Right, headed by Marine Le Pen of the Rassemblement Nationale, RN. The Italian government’s real strongman, deputy prime minister Matteo Salvini, and the Five Stars Movement, not to overlook Donald Trump, have all expressed their support for the gilets jaunes.

But they have also been praised by Olivier Besancenot of the Nouvel Parti Anticapitalist (NPA.). He declares himself overwhelmed by what he calls the biggest and most offensive movement since 1968:

> I have never known mobilisations like these, thousands of people who want to go to the centre of Paris, the Champs-Élysées, just like I imagine peasants did in their time to rebel against the lord, by going to his castle to demand accountability.?

He even goes so far as to say that he thinks it can and should challenge for power.

> Therefore, the only possible, credible political perspective for the social movement and the Left is for this movement to win, to be politicised, and to develop a form of political representation for itself.

> This movement must create a political foundation for a new social and political constellation of forces.”


Perhaps the most unstinting praise from the left? is given by Jean-Luc Mélenchon and his La France Insoumise, FI, now branding himself as a populist and a ’republican patriot’? Even the fossilized sect, Lutte Ouvriere, Workers’ Fight, has baptised the gilets jaunes with working class holy water.

Across Europe, lefts, both reformist and ?revolutionary?, have donned their own yellow vests, thinking this winning brand will enable them to escape the doldrums they find themselves in.

In Britain, it is the moribund People’s Assembly, in which the Communist Party of Britain, the Socialist Workers Party and Socialist Party are the main forces, that have done this. No matter that the Tommy Robinson crew, UKIP, and various fascist groups have also organised yellow vest marches and have even
attacked RMT picket lines. In Germany, although leftists like Sarah Wagenknecht and her wing of Die Linke have also expressed approval, the real support has come from the far right Alternative for Germany, the AfD.

Is this commonality between far right and left a mere misunderstanding or does it stem from the character of the movement itself? We need not waste time on the inconsistencies and questions this may raise for right-wing extremists, fascists, racists or the Gaullists in France, but we do have to deal with the politics of the "left" with regard to this movement.

The movement itself is not like others of recent decades and cannot simply be characterised as "left" or "progressive". On the streets, it does not present itself as the workers' movement or a movement of the racially oppressed or the youth, but as a "people's movement", a petty-bourgeois, populist movement. For all the difficulties of direct comparison, it is probably most like the Five Star movement in Italy, which is now part of a right-wing governing coalition.

None of this means that the left and the workers' movement should not intervene in it. The question is how to do so. Can the working class politically win the progressive parts of such a petty-bourgeois movement away from their reactionary and openly bourgeois spokespersons? To do this, an understanding of the class character of the gilets jaunes is essential. Otherwise, any intervention will be impressionistic and adventurist, and ultimately lead to concessions to the movement's prevailing petty bourgeois ideology. Trying to be the better, more determined, more combative, more "proletarian", gilets jaunes could only seriously mislead the left.

Our argument is that the working class can only seize the initiative in the midst of such a deep crisis of the French government, and hold it, if it acts as a mass social force in its own right, under its own colours, as a workers' movement. This is the only way to bring about a class differentiation and polarisation of the movement, splitting its proletarian and progressive elements away from the reactionary ones. Before we go into the issues of strategy and tactics, we therefore want to briefly review the development of the movement and determine its class character.

Development

For more than two months, the gilets jaunes have helped shape the political life of France. Practically every Saturday, supporters of the movement in many cities, large and small, demonstrated against the policies of the Macron government. During the week, smaller groups occupy blockade points, whilst on Saturdays there are real blockades or demonstrations, which often end with clashes with police and security forces. The most prominently covered by the media are undoubtedly those on the Champs Elysées. Although numbers dipped towards the end of the year, up to 80,000 people took part in the actions in January.

The Macron government had gambled that the movement could be defused by three factors. First, it was, and continues to be, violently demonised in the media and repressed by the police. Second, through late and partial concessions, such as the withdrawal of fuel price rises and an increase in the minimum wage in certain sectors and the offer of negotiations. Third, a loss of momentum and enthusiasm over Christmas and New Year.

The gamble did not pay off, and for a simple reason. The gilets jaunes embody a real, deep-seated and widespread social dissatisfaction, even if that is no longer primarily expressed by the unionised and class conscious vanguard of workers, young people and the racially oppressed. The movement involves, or attracts support from, the "middle classes" and unorganised workers, especially those in small and
medium-sized enterprises, as well as their employers who, as small entrepreneurs or weak capitalists, also see themselves as "victims" of government policy and big monopoly capital.

Significantly, however, the movement has not connected with either the organised workers' movement or with the migrants from the outer suburbs, the banlieues. This is confirmed by the sober assessment of Leftists who otherwise give a very positive picture of the gilets jaunes, such as Léon Crémieux, a member of the NPA who writes frequently in the publications of the International Socialist Organization of the USA. In a January 14 article, "gilets jaunes and Labor come to a Crossroad?, he writes: "The movement has not succeeded, beyond the very broad sympathy it has received, in bringing together the working classes of the suburbs and urban centers around it in action."

No doubt this is partly a result of the defeats and retreats suffered by workers in the unions and especially the class collaborationist politics of the union bureaucrats who have not dared to mount such a confrontation with Macron. Nonetheless, the fact that the organised workers and even the people of the banlieues have kept their distance from this movement, testifies to its petty-bourgeois, French nationalist, class character, as well as the presence of the far right amongst its leaders and organisers.

Here, Léon Crémieux makes a mistake typical of many other left-wing supporters, shying away from defining the class character of the movement. Instead, he relies on referring to the large number of wage earners, men and women, people from smaller businesses, etc, in the small towns and in the countryside. He also admits the significant influence of the far right in the movement:

"The movement does carry a heavy weight on its back; the weight of the extreme right-wing vote among wage workers.?

But he consoles himself about this ideological influence:

" ... beyond a small number of actual racist and homophobic acts, the targets that the gilets jaunes focused on as responsible for their situation are neither immigrants nor civil servants, which are the scapegoats pushed by the extreme right?.

?This movement has focused on what unifies it; the rejection of tax injustice, and dismisses what divides it, particularly racism. Even the right?s campaign in recent weeks against the global agreement around migration known as the Marrakesh Pact has not caught on within the movement."

The problem here is the lack of any perspective for action or a struggle against the influence of the right. Rather, the author reassures us that racism is not too open, that the movement focuses on other issues. This policy unfortunately amounts to a purely passive hope that the right will not push the Gilets Jaunes any further to the right, that this problem will somehow be solved by an expansion of the movement "from below".

After all, authors such as Léon Crémieux or Bernhard Schmid, who provides regular reports on the movement, recognise the real influence of right-wing extremists in the movement. Thus Schmid speaks of a "two-front struggle", which the left in France would have to lead, "against the undeniable right-wing extremist forces (also in the ranks of the protesters) as well as against the government camp" (http://www.labournet.

This shows the hopeless character of spontaneism, what Lenin called tailism, typical of the so-called "IS tradition? but equally found amongst all non- or anti-Leninists. This is the belief that any mass movement, if it has enough wage workers in it and is militant enough, will, left to its own inner logic, be left wing. The French left summed this up in the old slogan "tout ce qui bouge c?est rouge", everything that moves is red. As if fascists do not know how to "move".
The class character of the movement

The greater part of the left avoids the question of the class character of the movement. Instead, they content themselves with superficial observations about the "heterogeneity" of the movement and its "spontaneous" origin "from below". Others point out that a large part, if not the majority, are wage earners, albeit those who are not unionised and have not been politically mobilised before.

Unfortunately, the question of the class character of a movement is not answered simply by a sociological definition of its origin and sources of income. Many other petty-bourgeois-populist movements have organised themselves around social issues and democratic issues, for example, the Five Stars in Italy. The fact that the wage-earners who have entered the gilets jaunes have not joined unions in the past means that they are, first and foremost, shaped by the prevailing ideologies and political currents of French politics. Hence the high proportion of FN / RN support in the movement, hence the growth of support for Marine Le Pen in opinion polls since the movement arose. Undoubtedly, the movement benefits not only the FN and, beyond that, the fascists, but also the left-wing populism of Mélenchon and FI. What is significant here is that it is typical of a petty bourgeois movement that it benefits almost exclusively populist political movements.

For a movement to be working class, requires a leadership armed at least with the key goals of the working class. If such a movement does not go beyond the goals of the lower middle class, referred to, of course, as "the people", such as abolishing taxes, and things like speed limits, it will remain a petty bourgeois movement, no matter how many wage earners join it.

This is reflected in the movement's demands. The demands against the taxation of petrol and diesel and for lower prices clearly come from the petty-bourgeois and populist arsenal. The slogans of the workers' movement, against regressive indirect taxes such as VAT and for a progressive direct taxation of wealth and corporate profits, provide the real answer to how the state should raise necessary income. However, the exclusive focus on price and tax cuts makes it much easier to bring together different, even antagonistic, classes, as every "citizen" seems to benefit from them.

Last, but not least, the 42 demands of the movement published on 3 December reveal their petty-bourgeois-populist character. They read like a village general store, reflecting the heterogeneity of the movement. Thus, there are those relating to the minimum wage, secure pensions, kindergarten places for all and other social demands as well as tax reduction claims and the call for favouring (French) small business owners.

There is a call for referendums on important legislative proposals but, at the same time, for extending the presidency to seven years, instead of the present five. In addition, the calls for "substantial resources for justice, police, gendarmerie and army" envisage a strong state. There are also openly racist demands for "immediate deportation" of rejected asylum seekers and obliging migrants to "become French", including mandatory tests of their "fitness? for citizenship.

Obviously, the movement is not fascist, but right-wing populism plays a central role in it. The fact that part of it also raises social issues and calls for higher wages does not refute this. At the same time, there have been cases of open racism and homophobia. Such openly reactionary and racist outbursts, though not yet widespread, show that, implicitly, those the movement is trying to assemble, those it regards as "the people", are the white French, not the entire working population, including those in the banlieues, the Muslim and immigrated workers.

Role of the right
The "spontaneous" tendency to the right was most clearly revealed at the demonstration on November 24 in Paris. Up to 10,000, about 10 percent of the estimated national mobilisation, confronted the police on the Champs-Élysées and the battles were led by the "extreme right wing", made up of fascist and semi-fascist forces to the right of the RN. While most of the protesters were probably not themselves fascists, they were clearly ready to accept their leadership on that day. The "movement" and its main forces have not attempted to expel fascist elements such as Les Identitaires.

However, on December 1 there were clashes between right and left - but unfortunately this is still more of an exception than the rule. The clashes themselves had a more episodic character, as the article "Yellow Vest: Repression and Counterstrategies" (https://www.global-reports.com[2]), grasswurzel.net/gwr/2018/12/gelbwesten-repression-und-gegenstrategien/), written by a libertarian author, proves:

"The factor, which is most prone to spoil the militant revolutionary romanticism from an emancipatory and libertarian-socialist viewpoint, however, is a completely different phenomenon, which could be observed during these conflicts, in particular in Paris on the 24th November and 1st December, for the first time in the history of social struggles in France. That militants from ultra-right and left radical groups sometimes appeared together on the barricades and formed a kind of militant united front, united in the fight against the police and Macron. (...)"

Above all, in Paris on 24 November, groups from the "Bastion social" took over the usual strategy of the left insurrectionists and stationed themselves on the Champs-Élysées at the head of the demonstration of the gilets jaunes and so immediately came into a confrontation with the police. On December 1, the "Bastion Social" militants were the first to arrive at the Arc de Triomphe early in the morning and immediately started fighting the police. The insurrectionists of the "Invisible Committee" and the anti-fascists of "Action Antifasciste Paris-Banlieue" only came afterwards, in the afternoon, and continued the fighting.

It was they who damaged parts of the Arch, which the ultra-right would never do because they honour the "grave of the unknown soldier" as a national sanctuary. It was during the transition, almost a changing of the guard, that the two groups clashed. This explains why it was precisely here that Yvan Benedetti, former head of L'œuvre française, suspected of being involved in the murder of the antifascist Victor Méric in 2013 and today the leader of the "Parti nationaliste français" (PNF), was beaten and hospitalised by left-wing radicals wearing yellow vests. Precisely because some militants were wearing gilets jaunes and others look the same in streetfighter outfits, this is where an explanation is needed: Is this a de facto united front of left radical militants with Nazi militants? (https://www.graswurzel.net/[3] gwr / 2018/12 / yellow west-repression-and-up strategies/)

The short exchange of blows had a merely episodic character that day. Fascists and "left-wing radicals" dissolved themselves in the fight for the same goal, the same content, a form of "cooperation" that can only be described as reactionary. Regardless of individual skirmishes, leftist radicals found themselves in united action with Nazis for several hours. Whilst they clearly did not have a common plan or coordination, these leftists were prepared to join in an action which the fascists and ultra-right had initiated and that lasted for several hours during which they ?cooperated? against the police.

Changes?

Undoubtedly, leftists have intervened in the movement from the outset, and in some places there are links between the gilets jaunes and progressive forces, including trade unionists and students. This is clearly a positive step that makes it clear that people can be won over to a more conscious, leftist policy. But it does
not change the petty-bourgeois character of the movement itself.

That the demands have a clearly petty-bourgeois character is undeniable, as is the influence of the Right. Behind the glib phrases, such as the "heterogeneity" of the movement, is the unwillingness to ask the question which social force, which class, dominates the movement.

Centrists like RIO, the German section of the Fraccion Trotskista, are even hardening their view that this movement is "actually leaderless". Of course, this conclusion can only be reached if the question of leadership is posed merely as a question of the representation of political parties and organisations, with recognised, representative leaders. Seen in this way, the gilets jaunes, as long as they have not found a recognised form of election of representatives, speakers, etc., are, as it were by definition, leaderless.

This, however, conceals the real question of which class dominates and leads the movement. Not even the most zealous supporters from the left or the mainstream of the French left, especially La France Insoumise, would assert that it is the working class. After all, populists refer to the "people", in which the working class is dissolved as an independent force, as the actual subject of social change.

This, too, shows a fatal superficiality among the German "radical left". For example, Peter Schaber explains in ?Lower Class Magazine? that social movements are heterogeneous, that in a sense this is their "natural state". Behind this statement, which is already useless in the abstract and in its generality, the question of which class dominates and directs a particular social movement disappears. This also applies to the superficial assertion of RIO / FT that the movement is above all "leaderless".

This claim ultimately implies that the question of which class dominates or shapes a movement politically plays no role for Marxists in characterising it, or deciding on working class tactics towards it.

Unfortunately, the gilets jaunes also reflect a change in the political landscape and the relationship between the working class and petty bourgeoisie. For years, the working class has been the dominant force in the struggle against various bourgeois governments and capital. For years, the CGT has shown itself to be the central organisation that has repeatedly been exposed to the pressure of more radical forces. This hegemony also meant that other mass movements, especially those of the youth (pupils, students) as well as the migrants in the banlieues, manifested themselves as leftist, progressive movements. Even the more radical petty-bourgeois movements such as the Confédération paysanne of José Bové, the anti-globalisation movement or the movement against the EU constitution, were influenced by the Left against this background.

The gilets jaunes mark a profound change in the relationship between classes. Their rejection not only of bourgeois parties, but of all parties and unions signals not only a perhaps understandable mistrust, but also a clear political development to the Right, as compared to previous social movements. The reservations about the leadership of the trade unions, and even more against those on the far left, may be quite understandable, but the demand that they should renounce open participation, after their intervention with political or trade union proposals, has a clearly reactionary character. This demand means nothing less than that the working class should not appear as a collective subject, that the wage-earners should only be visible as individuals, as citizens among other citizens.

Finally, the gilets jaunes also reflect the weakness, almost the collapse, of the political parties of the workers' movement. While over 10 years ago the crisis of the Parti Socialiste (PS) and Communist Party led to the formation of the NPA as a centrist party and the Parti de Gauche as a reformist party, that is, to the emergence of leftist political parties of the workers' movement, they themselves have declined in recent years as a result of their own contradictions.
The PS has split almost to complete irrelevance. The PCF is languishing. The NPA is significantly weaker than in the first phase after its founding and the PdG was transformed into a left-populist project, La France Insoumise. Instead of a reformist, bourgeois workers' party, Mélenchon's leadership looked for the emergence of a populist party, a "people's party". He also does not want to know anything about red flags, instead the Tricolour is hoisted. The "aggressive" character of French nationalism is to be pacified by an allegedly progressive and inclusive "left patriotism". In truth, this only fuels the "real" patriots and nationalists, who joyfully point out that the "left" Mélenchon is now inciting against "cosmopolitanism" and open borders.

All this is reflected in the movement. The left-wing forces have made no noteworthy substantive objections to the 42 demands, even though they have no real democratic legitimacy.

On the contrary. Mélenchon and his movement support them and point out that they would actually comply with La France Insoumise's programme. And he's not wrong. In many respects, this mixture of Keynianism, social security for the poor and lower income brackets of the working class, tax relief, the call for a strong state and regulated migration, and the commitment to the French nation (including its "republicanism") corresponds to the populism of his movement.

The RN and the even more right-wing forces are also happy with it, because their right-wing populism now presents itself as "social", in the case of the fascist and semi-fascist organisations even as "anti-capitalist" and "revolutionary". They, too, present themselves as representatives of the interests of the "masses of the people" against the "elite". Conversely, it corresponds to the populism of the right, but also of the left, that the concerns of "patriotic" entrepreneurs and domestic market-oriented capitalists should be served, after all, they too belong to the "people," this imaginary, cross-class political miracle bag, the evocation of which, in the end, can only conceal bourgeois and petty-bourgeois interests.

Even "revolutionary" forces have adapted opportunistically to the demands of the movement. As RIO explains in December 2018: "At the moment, the gilets jaunes' list of demands, addressed to the government, contains extremely progressive items such as the increase in the minimum wage, the end of temporary agency work, old-age pensions, the reintroduction of the wealth tax, the linking of wages to inflation, limiting precarious contracts, more taxes for large companies, etc. " The reactionary demands for racist laws or for more resources for the forces of repression, are not mentioned at all so as not to spoil the progressive image.

This euphemistic description of the gilets jaunes programme can be found again and again at FT/RIO in other places.

"The cross-class social basis, in which the vast majority belong to the working class (which, however, due to the decline of the organisation and the consciousness of the workers' movement as a result of the conciliatory attitude of the trade union bureaucracy, do not understand themselves as working class) and including sectors of the declassed middle class with petty-bourgeois characteristics, and the intermediate strata of the self-employed, explains the inconsistent character of the social and economic demands raised by the movement. Some are clearly progressive, such as increasing the minimum wage or cancelling some indirect taxes, while others are much more unclear, such as calls for a reduction in 'employer fees'. " (The gilets jaunes and the pre-revolutionary elements of the situation; https://www.klassegegenklasse.org/frankreich-die-gelben-westen-und-die-v... [4])

What is supposed to be "unclear" about the reduction of "employers' fees", a classic bourgeois and neoliberal demand, remains the secret of this grouping. It seems to be glossing over the reactionary and anti-worker aspects of the programme, rather than addressing them clearly. In doing so, the different demands,
some of which are directly opposed to each other, which are thrown together by the gilets jaunes into a contradictory mishmash, illustrate precisely the class character of the movement and the hegemonic role of the petty bourgeoisie.

That the French and European right can welcome this programme should surprise no one, since it is in line with the demands raised by other, similar, populist movements.

All this makes it clear that the left in the movement is not waging a consistent political struggle against right-wing influence, but is adapting at crucial points. Part of this adjustment is to downplay the influence of right-wing forces. While the more autonomous or libertarian supporters of the movement present this as a kind of "natural state" of movements, groups like RIO are turning to calling the influence of the right "still marginal".

We have shown above the role of the right in the actions on November 24 and on January 1. The FT transforms this into the "revolutionary awakening of the 'little people'":

"The most subversive element of the current uprising is its radical methods and the fact that the protest is an expression of suffering that resonates far beyond the mobilised Yellow Vest sector. This is evidenced by the very broad support that exists in public opinion for the movement, even after the "scenes of violence" of Saturday, November 24, on which the government was counting to turn the population against the movement.

"For the first time in a long time in France, we are witnessing the decision to blockade from "below", without any control by the government or the unions, left-wing or far-right parties. This blockade has been effective, without coordination at the territorial level from the authorities or trade unions. This absolutely subversive attitude, in contrast to the tame demonstrations characteristic of the routine actions of union headquarters or the left, was reflected in the decision to launch the November 24 demonstration on the Champs Elysées, even though the government had banned it. A new milestone was reached with the "revolutionary day" on December 1, which shook Paris and many cities in the region, while the executive was completely overwhelmed by the effort to maintain order." (https://www.klassegegenklasse.org/frankreich-die-gelben-westen-und-die-v...)

The fact that the actions on the "revolutionary days" were led by the fascists does not seem to bother such revolutionaries. What could be problematic about this united action as long as it comes from "below" and is "the most subversive element of the current insurgency"?

Instead of strongly criticising the adventurist policies of the anarchists and insurrectionists, these so-called "Trotskyists" pursue a policy that reminds us all too much of the disastrous policy of the KPD in the "red referendum".

Such a policy can only strengthen the position of the right, because it involuntarily ascribes an "unconscious" leading role to those who are being led. Who fights for what, which political and class forces are at work in the "subversive action", becomes a secondary thing, it disappears completely behind the form of confrontation. The movement is everything, the goal; its political content; is nothing. Or apparently it is automatically driven on by its own "progressive dynamics"?

Influence of the right

The influence of the far right has not disappeared since the rioting of November 17, even if it appears somewhat mediated in many places. Of course, figures like Marine Le Pen also offended parts of the movement as she turned against the occupation of Amazon. At the same time, their local and regional
officials continue to act. In addition, as a number of their speeches and press releases show, the RN competed with Mélenchon to establish itself as the parliamentary mouthpiece of the "gilets jaunes". Of course, it also plays into the hands of RN representatives when the media present them as spokespersons or supporters of the movement.

Opinion polls also point to an increase in RN and other right-wing forces. By contrast, La France Insoumise is likely to stagnate. So far, in any case, according to polls in mid-December 2018, which see RN in elections at 24 percent, Macron's La République en Marche (LREM) at 18 percent. In these surveys, Debout la France, a Rightist split from RN, was at 8 percent. Sarkozy's Les Republicains were on 11 percent, La France Insoumise 9 percent, the Greens 8 percent and the Social Democrats 4.5 percent. (Surveys at the time of the yellow vest: Le Pen's party is ahead; [5] 4250308.html).

Although the gilets jaunes do not have a unified, elected leadership structure, they have "speakers," like any mass movement. Of course, the fact that these are not democratically legitimised does not mean that they are not leaders, it rather means that there are involuntarily found leaders who more or less accurately reflect the character's movement, including its competing wings.

Two well-known leaders on the right-wing of the movement are clearly truck drivers Eric Drouet and Maxime Nicolle alias "Fly Rider". It is controversial whether Drouet supported Le Pen in the last elections, but his undeniably anti-immigrant and racist posts from 2018 (and before) are undisputed. Nicolle is considered a fan of obscure conspiracy theories, "liked" a series of statements by the RN and Le Pen and claims that the December 11 attack in Strasbourg was a "false flag" government operation. Admittedly, these leaders do not only receive approval from the rights. So Mélenchon declared Drouet a "leader of the movement" and a "fascinating personality".

Certainly, there are also more well-known, non-racist representatives of the movement, such as the black Caribbean Frenchwoman, Priscillia Ludosky, a 39-year-old therapist who, along with Drouet and Nicolle, is one of the figureheads of the movement.

"This Saturday, January 5, Ms Ludosky and Mr Nicolle came together at the closing demonstration of the demo in front of the Paris City Hall, the latter restricting himself to calling for the introduction of referendums by citizens. In parts of the protest movement, this desire seemed to develop into the new "magic recipe" just before Christmas, and since this demand does not seem to have a class character, the rightist forces are more than happy with it." (Http://www.labournet.de/internationales/frankreich/soziale_konflikte-frankreich/frankreich-gelbe-westen-protest-abflauen-war-gestern-derzeit-steht-wiederaufflammen-auf-der-tagesordnung-regierungssprecher-auf-der-flucht/)

On January 12, Nicolle and Ludosky had called together for the nationwide demonstration in Bourges, at the head of which they also marched. These appearances together make clear, independent of what the individuals may think of it, the populist, indeed popular-front, nature of the movement, the sometimes peaceful, sometimes combative, but continuous cooperation of right and "left". In any case, the composition of the figureheads shows that, at least on this level, the right-wing petty bourgeois are to the fore, especially as Ludosky herself represents only a left-leaning petty-bourgeois, but by no means a proletarian class standpoint.

Undoubtedly, the intervention of leftists or trade unionists at local level has also led to left-wing shifts. However, it illustrates the inner balance of power in the movement that, while they can even play a dominant role in some cities or local committees, they do not on a national level. At best, the left-populist
France Insoumise can claim an important influence here.

All this points to the fact that rightists, right-wing populists, etc. are not marginal, but an integral part of the movement. The working class as such plays a minor role. This can be seen even in comparatively advanced statements, such as the call for people's assemblies from the city of Commercy. It is understandable that this assembly, a small French town courted by numerous leftists as a focal point of the progressive forces, is calling for a national assembly of delegates.

At the same time, however, it does not go beyond radical petty-bourgeois democratism and even contains false, anti-political, tendencies, where it fundamentally rejects the election of representatives of the movement. This can only mean that the role is played by the unelected.

Perspectives

Although the gilets jaunes have grown again in the first weeks of the year, a political differentiation of the movement is more and more inevitable. Their own forms of action will increasingly reach their limits and some are also controversial. The fighting with the police on the Champs Elysées is sure to upset a number of supporters. Paradoxically, it was undoubtedly these forms of action that forced the president and government to make concessions, certainly not the number of demonstrators.

Equally, there can be no open discussion on tactics that would lead to binding decisions, as this would inevitably undermine the "unity" of the movement. In particular, this applies to the demands of the movement. If the movement focusses on a certain class political direction, for example, social demands or tax demands for the self-employed and small business owners, this would not only define goals more precisely, it would at the same time polarise them according to political directions and classes. But this is exactly what more or less everyone in the movement tries to avoid in order not to expose themselves to the accusation of being "splitters".

Therefore, the demand for the "resignation of Macron", the symbol of the elite, on the one hand, and the demands for "radical democracy", on the other, appear as a unifying bond. The demand for Macron's resignation may seem radical, but it leaves completely open who should replace him and by what process. Under the given conditions, there would probably be new elections that threaten a victory for RN and Le Pen, even though they would probably have to form a coalition with other forces.

In any case, even now, among the gilets jaunes, the question arises as to whether to engage in elections and which party to vote for. Right and left populism speculate more or less blatantly on this development, with Le Pen certainly having the lead here. Due to the widespread general rejection of "politics" in the movement, all the established parties try not to appear too openly, but hope that the gilets jaunes "of course" can only choose between RN, Debout la France or La France Insoumise. They also hope, of course, that the movement itself will not produce a list of its own for the European elections, which would cost them votes. In any case, these three parties have a good chance that their calculations for the European elections will benefit from the votes of the gilets jaunes.

Another, more "resolute" wing of the movement is suspicious of this danger and counters it by raising the demand for binding popular referenda on all major issues, a form of radical petty-bourgeois democratism. For them, political parties, representatives, representation per se, are evil and they should be made superfluous by constant voting. What sounds ultra-democratic at first glance, however, is above all ultra-utopian. In reality, every democracy (including the proletarian) faces the problem of representation, the difference between the working-class council democracy and bourgeois parliamentarism is not that there are no representatives but, firstly, the class character of the state on which this democracy builds, and secondly, how this representation is controlled and deselected by its base.
However, what the "radical" demands for democracy in the gilets jaunes envisage is in many respects a petty-bourgeois utopia. On the one hand, the "citizens" are seeking to abolish any form of representation, to decide everything "directly". On the other hand, the property relations of society should "naturally" remain untouched by all these issues.

At best, these utopian ideas are disorganising. No movement can do without nationwide representatives, demands, speakers. Rejecting them per se does not mean democratisation of any movement, but means that speakers like Drouet and Nicolle can and will continue to fill the leadership role.

The working class and a petty-bourgeois-populist movement

All this shows that a longer-term perspective for the wage-earners mobilised by the gilets jaunes will not come spontaneously out of the movement. Rather, a revolutionary class policy must combine several elements:

1. The current political crisis in France offers favourable conditions for the working class, unions, youth to mobilise against the Macron government and capital. This was demonstrated by the strikes of pupils and students in December, as well as the limited action days of the CGT.

2. In order to win the initiative in the fight against the government, the working class itself, as a class force, must enter the field of social and political confrontation with its own methods and demands. Therefore, it needs a fighting programme that takes up the progressive demands of the gilets jaunes and radicalises them, for example, a much higher minimum wage requirement of 1800 euros, clearly rejects the reactionary demands and replaces them with progressive ones; no deportations, no compulsory tests of migrants and their adaptation to the French culture, open the borders for refugees and migrants.

3. In order to do so, militant and left-wing rank and file trade unionists must take the initiative to demand unlimited political mass strikes from the CGT and SUD, as well as from all other unions.

4. Only under these conditions can the workers’ movement become an attractive force that can break the wage-dependent parts of the gilets jaunes from their petty-bourgeois political orientation and their anti-political prejudices.

5. With such a policy, trade unionists, radical leftists, anticapitalists and revolutionaries should intervene to polarise and split the movement along the class line. Of course, this includes joint action with local and progressive parts of the gilets jaunes and intervention at their demonstrations. However, these must always be linked to a clear criticism of reactionary, bourgeois and populist ideas in the movement and an openly organised appearance.

6. This also means recognising that today, in France, we are not dealing simply with a confrontation between two "camps", the Government / Macron, and the People, embodied by the gilets jaunes. Such an idea overlooks the fact that we are dealing with a petty-bourgeois-dominated, cross-class, popular-front movement that in turn reflects a split in the bourgeois camp, much like other populist formations that are directed against the elite.

Revolutionary Marxist politics must break this appearance of two camps. Otherwise, we condemn the workers’ movement to the tailist policies of Mélenchon.

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