



## In France, the revolt of the "Gilets Jaunes".

In the autumn of 2018, France is experiencing an unprecedented episode. A heterogeneous movement, born and developed outside any trade union structure. This movement declares itself apolitical and multiplies blocking actions and demonstrations in which strong popular anger is expressed, obscuring all other mobilizations from the media scene. The CGT has considered this anger to be largely legitimate from the outset, even if it is sometimes expressed in a contradictory way.

Many questions arise today, and will arise tomorrow for the trade union movement.

For more than 10 years, France has been under pressure from austerity and liberal policies. Whatever the president at the head of the country (Jacques Chirac, conservative liberal - Nicolas Sarkozy, Reagan liberal - Holland, social liberal - Emmanuel Macron, neo-liberal pretending to manage the country like a company) the same policy has been enforced with more or less brutality. Rolling with the punches at some point, leads to explosion. The last straw was the fuel tax.

This social movement began in rural and peri-urban areas where for many years, successive governments have removed public services under the pretext of reducing state spending. One of its characteristics is that it did not trigger strikes in companies, the target of this "revolt" being the government and more particularly President Macron.

Rejecting the government's false ecological pretext [the fuel tax is not supported by pollution control funding] to make the poorest pay for the car dependency imposed by the remoteness of workplaces, the scarcity of public services, the removal of train stations and small railway lines, those who became the "gilets jaunes" first mobilized against the increase in additional fuel taxes.

Today, on the roundabouts, where there are workers, unemployed and retired and pensioners, small business bosses, 85% of the "yellow vests" have never, or very seldom, met the unions. Among these first protesters who declare themselves apolitical and allergic to any structure, it must be noted that extreme right-wing political parties, although in the minority, are present, active and trying to influence the demands. But their strategy is partly failing and left-wing slogans dominate, even if anti-migrant rhetoric is recurrent.

Without government reactions, the protesters decided to organize demonstrations on Saturdays in the cities to make their movement visible and to measure the massive support of the population. Its protesters have been joined by small groups of extremists and people whose sole purpose is looting at the expense of claims.

In the various demonstrations, we are far from the only watchword that launched this movement. The reason for the protest, which initially concerned the cost of fuel and the impossibility of paying this umpteenth increase, was supplemented by other equally legitimate demands: abolition of the increase in fuel taxes, increase of the minimum wage and social minima, abolition of the increase in social contributions for pensioners, indexation of wages and pensions on inflation, restoration of the wealth tax (ISF), fight against tax evasion...

These are all demands that are mostly in line with those made by some trade union organisations over the years.

On the very first demonstration, on 17 November, the demonstrators were 287,000 participants (figure provided by the government) or 1,000,000 (figure provided by the yellow vests), on 24 November there were 166,000 participants (figure provided by the government) or 750,000 (figure provided by the yellow vests), on 1 December, 136,000 participants (figure provided by the government), 700,000 (figure provided

by yellow vests), on December 8, 125,000 participants (figure provided by the government), 520,000 (figure provided by yellow vests).

While the number of demonstrators seems to be decreasing, the violence of demonstrators and police forces is increasing from demonstration to demonstration leading to serious injuries, disabilities, deaths, destruction of cars, scooters..., destruction of public and private equipment as well as the looting of many shops.

On<sup>1</sup> December, the CGT organised, as it does every year, a demonstration by the unemployed, which was attended by 15,000 participants (number provided by the CGT) or 2,100 (number provided by the police).

It is President Macron's and his government's refusal to listen to the demands and negotiate a way out of the crisis that shatters the protesters' hope of living better and without fear for the future.

The President and his government first chose to follow a rotting strategy.

"The Parisian demonstrations will be the scene of extreme violence and may cause deaths.' A prophecy repeated over and over again in the media, on social networks and above all at the top of the state, which is the only one with the means to resolve the situation but which has made the choice to try and govern through dramatization and fear.

This situation, described as insurrectional because of the radicalisation of the movement and its violence, has been reinforced by the strategy adopted by the government since mid-November, which has increased fatigue, mistrust and disappointment in the face of piecemeal half-measures as a concession. This is compounded by the now legendary deafness of the government, which listens but does not hear, and has attacked all social rights won in past struggles since the beginning of President Macron's mandate.

After the extremely violent demonstration on<sup>1</sup> December, the Presidency of the Republic chose on 4 December to persevere in the vein of outrageous dramatisation: "We have reason to fear very great violence", according to the services of the President, who say they fear the mobilisation of a "hard core of several thousand people", who would go to Paris "to break and kill".

In fact, since the beginning of the protest, the demonstrators have been counting the number of seriously injured and permanently disabled people (hands ripped off by grenades, eyes gouged out, people in a coma and even an 80-year-old retired woman, peaceful, present in her apartment, killed by a grenade thrown by the police) by the security forces. During the demonstration on 8 December, the government even decided to have Paris checked by armoured vehicles, not hesitating to launch them against the protesters. Never before had tanks been used in France against demonstrators in the middle of Paris.

Emmanuel Macron, far from playing his role as a civil peacekeeper and institutional stabilizer, is playing the social fireball and prefers to use hysterization and seeking to crush the movement by subjecting protesters to social humiliation. According to a traditional right-wing newspaper, the President's entourage speaks of "putsch" in preparation, while *Valeurs actuelles*, another conservative newspaper, reports that ministers "fear for their lives". Anonymous comments that serve as a cleavage strategy to reject yellow vests and calm the anger of the majority of protesters by waving the red flag of chaos.

This strategy, contrary to all rationality, has now led to protests from other categories of protesters, high school and university students, farmers, nurses, prison guards, energy experts...

From the beginning, the CGT has sought, whenever it is possible to agree on demands other than that of the extreme right, to create a union of all protesters, yellow vests, high school students, workers, pensioners, other trade union organizations, which alone will make it possible to bring down austerity policies and replace them with progressive policies.

Through this union we also wish to oppose the significant risk of the extreme right recovering its protests.

State violence and repression are also rampant against other protesters, as shown by images around the world of 15-year-old high school students held kneeling with their hands on their heads by police officers as dangerous terrorists.

On Monday evening, December 11, after receiving the various trade union organisations in the Presidency's premises, without telling them anything, the President staged himself. But he still has not understood anything: the liberal course and austerity are maintained. The President of the Republic has carried out a

real misleading exercise! A trick of communication combining threats, contempt and hypocritical culpa me, from the very first minutes of his intervention...

For the CGT, the demands to be met, for "A state of economic and social emergency", are: an immediate increase in the minimum wage, in wages, pensions, civil service wages, more tax justice, the restoration of the ISF, the requirement for negotiations on wages in companies, public services that meet needs, the relaunch of industrial policy.

On Friday, December 14, the CGT organizes demonstrations all over France, in which yellow vests and all protesters wishing a more progressive policy are welcome. Other trade unions and associative organisations have already announced their presence: FO, FSU, Solidaires, UNEF, UNL...

The CGT hopes that the union of protesters will make it clear to the government that it must hear and respond to the demands made.

*On December 13, 2018, Montreuil*