

Yellow Vests Rise Against Neo-Liberal 'King' Macron

For centuries, the “left” hoped popular movements would lead to changes for the better. Today, many leftists seem terrified of popular movements for change, convinced “populism” must lead to “fascism.” But it needn’t be so, says Diana Johnstone.

By Diana Johnstone

in Paris



Every automobile in France is supposed to be equipped with a yellow vest. This is so that in case of accident or breakdown on a highway, the driver can put it on to ensure visibility and avoid getting run over.

So the idea of wearing your yellow vest to demonstrate against unpopular government measures caught on quickly. The costume was at hand and didn’t have to be provided by Soros for some more or less manufactured “color revolution”. The symbolism was fitting: in case of socio-economic emergency, show that you don’t want to be run over.

As everybody knows, what set off the protest movement was yet another rise in gasoline taxes. But it was immediately clear that much more was involved. The gasoline tax was the last straw in a long series of measures favoring the rich at the expense of the majority of the population. That is why the movement achieved almost instant popularity and support.

The Voices of the People

The Yellow Vests held their first demonstrations on

Saturday, November 17, on the Champs-Élysées in Paris. It was totally unlike the usual trade union demonstrations, well organized to march down the boulevard between the Place de la République and the Place de la Bastille, or the other way around, carrying banners and listening to speeches from leaders at the end. The Gilets Jaunes just came, with no organization, no leaders to tell them where to go or to harangue the crowd. They were just there, in the yellow vests, angry and ready to explain their anger to any sympathetic listener.

Briefly, the message was this: we can't make ends meet. The cost of living keeps going up, and our incomes keep going down. We just can't take it any more. The government must stop, think and change course.

But so far, the reaction of the government was to send police to spray torrents of tear gas on the crowd, apparently to keep the people at a distance from the nearby Presidential residence, the Elysee Palace. President Macron was somewhere else, apparently considering himself above and beyond it all.

But those who were listening could learn a lot about the state of France today. Especially in the small towns and rural areas, where many protesters came from. Things are much worse than officials and media in Paris have let on.

There were young women who were working seven days a week and despaired of having enough money to feed and clothe their children.

People were angry but ready to explain very clearly the economic issues.

Colette, age 83, doesn't own a car, but explained to whoever would listen that the steep raise of gasoline prices would also hurt people who don't drive, by affecting prices of food and other necessities. She had done the calculations and figured it would cost a retired person 80 euros per month.

"Macron didn't run on the promise to freeze pensions", recalled a Yellow Vest, but that is what he has done, along with increasing solidarity taxes on pensioners.

A significant and recurring complaint concerned the matter of health care. France has long had the best public health program in the world, but this is being steadily undermined to meet the primary need of capital: profit. In the past few years, there has been a growing government campaign to encourage, and finally to oblige people to subscribe to a "*mutuelle*", that is, a private health insurance, ostensibly to fill "the gaps" not covered by France's universal health coverage. The "gaps" can be the 15% that is not covered for ordinary illnesses (grave illnesses are covered 100%), or for medicines taken off the "covered" list, or for dental work, among other things. The "gaps" to fill keep expanding, along with the cost of subscribing to the *mutuelle*. In reality, this program, sold to the public as modernizing improvement, is a gradual move toward privatization of health care. It is a sneaky method of opening the whole field of public health to international financial capital investment. This gambit has not fooled ordinary people and is high on the list of complaints by the Gilets Jaunes.

The degradation of care in the public hospitals is another complaint. There are fewer and fewer hospitals in rural

areas, and one must “wait long enough to die” emergency rooms. Those who can afford it are turning to private hospitals. But most can't. Nurses are overworked and underpaid. When one hears what nurses have to endure, one is reminded that this is indeed a noble profession.

In all this I was reminded of a young woman we met at a public picnic in southwestern France last summer. She cares for elderly people who live at home alone in rural areas, driving from one to another, to feed them, bathe them, offer a moment of cheerful company and understanding. She loves her vocation, loves helping old people, although it barely allows her to make a living. She will be among those who will have to pay more to get from one patient to the next.

People pay taxes willingly when they are getting something for it. But not when the things they are used to are being taken away. The tax evaders are the super-rich and the big corporations with their batteries of lawyers and safe havens, or intruders like Amazon and Google, but ordinary French people have been relatively disciplined in paying taxes in return for excellent public services: optimum health care, first class public transport, rapid and efficient postal service, free university education. But all that is under assault from the reign of financial capital called “neo-liberalism” here. In rural areas, more and more post offices, schools and hospitals are shut down, unprofitable train service is discontinued as “free competition” is introduced following European Union directives – measures which oblige people to drive their cars more than ever. Especially when huge shopping centers drain small towns of their traditional shops.

Incoherent Energy Policies

And the tax announced by the government – an additional 6.6 cents per liter for diesel and an additional 2.9 centers per liter of gasoline – are only the first steps in a series of planned increases over the next years. The measures are supposed to incite people to drive less or even better, to scrap their old vehicles and buy nice new electric cars.

More and more “governance” is an exercise in social engineering by technocrats who know what is best. This particular exercise goes directly opposite to an earlier government measure of social engineering which used economic incitements to get people to buy cars running on diesel. Now the government has changed its mind. Over half of personal vehicles still run on diesel, although the percentage has been dropping. Now their owners are told to go buy an electric car instead. But people living on the edge simply can't afford the switch.

Besides, the energy policy is incoherent. In theory, the “green” economy includes shutting down France's many nuclear power plants. Without them, where would the electricity come from to run the electric cars? And nuclear power is “clean”, no CO₂. So what is going on? People wonder.

The most promising alternative sources of energy in France are the strong tides along northern coasts. But last July, the Tidal Energies project on the Normandy coast was suddenly dropped because it wasn't profitable – not enough customers. This is symptomatic of what is wrong with the current government. Major new industrial projects are almost never profitable at first, which is why they need government

support and subsidies to get going, with a view to the future. Such projects were supported under de Gaulle, raising France to the status of major industrial power, and providing unprecedented prosperity for the population as a whole. But the Macron government is not investing in the future nor doing anything to preserve industries that remain. The key French energy corporation Alstom was sold to General Electric under his watch.

Indeed, it is perfectly hypocritical to call the French gas tax an “ecotax” since the returns from a genuine ecotax would be invested to develop clean energies – such as tidal power plants. Rather, the benefits are earmarked to balance the budget, that is, to serve the government debt. The Macronian gas tax is just another austerity measure – along with cutting back public services and “selling the family jewels”, that is, selling potential money-makers like Alstom, port facilities and the Paris airports.

The Government Misses the Point

Initial government responses showed that they weren't listening. They dipped into their pool of clichés to denigrate something they didn't want to bother to understand.

President Macron's first reaction was to guilt-trip the protesters by invoking the globalists' most powerful argument for imposing unpopular measures: global warming. Whatever small complaints people may have, he indicated, that is nothing compared to the future of the planet.

This did not impress people who, yes, have heard all about climate change and care as much as anyone for the

environment, but who are obliged to retort: "I'm more worried about the end of the month than about the end of the world."

After the second Yellow Vest Saturday, November 25, which saw more demonstrators and more tear gas, the Minister in charge of the budget, Gérard Darmanin, declared that what had demonstrated on the Champs-Élysée was "la peste brune", the brown plague, meaning fascists. (For those who enjoy excoriating the French as racist, it should be noted that Darmanin is of Algerian working class origins). This remark caused an uproar of indignation that revealed just how great is public sympathy for the movement – over 70% approval by latest polls, even after uncontrolled vandalism. Macron's Minister of the Interior, Christophe Castaner, was obliged to declare that government communication had been badly managed. Of course, that is the familiar technocratic excuse: we are always right, but it is all a matter of our "communication", not of the facts on the ground.

Maybe I have missed something, but of the many interviews I have listened to, I have not heard one word that would fall into the categories of "far right", much less "fascism" – or even that indicated any particular preference in regard to political parties. These people are wholly concerned with concrete practical issues. Not a whiff of ideology – remarkable in Paris!

Some people ignorant of French history and eager to exhibit their leftist purism have suggested that the Yellow Vests are dangerously nationalistic because they occasionally wave French flags and sing La Marseillaise. That simply means that they are French. Historically, the French left is

patriotic, especially when it is revolting against the aristocrats and the rich or during the Nazi Occupation. (The exception was the student uprising of May 1968, which was not a revolt of the poor but a revolt in a time of prosperity in favor of greater personal freedom: "it is forbidden to forbid". The May '68 generation has turned out to be the most anti-French generation in history, for reasons that can't be dealt with here. To some extent, the Yellow Vests mark a return of the people after half a century of scorn from the liberal intelligentsia.) It is just a way of saying, We are the people, we do the work, and you must listen to our grievances. To be bad, "nationalism" must be aggressive toward other nations. This movement is not attacking anybody, it is strictly staying home.

The Weakness of Macron

The Yellow Vests have made clear to the whole world that Emmanuel Macron was an artificial product sold to the electorate by an extraordinary media campaign.

Macron was the rabbit magically pulled out of a top hat, sponsored by what must be called the French oligarchy. After catching the eye of established king-maker Jacques Attali, the young Macron was given a stint at the Rothschild bank where he could quickly gain a small fortune, ensuring his class loyalty to his sponsors. Media saturation and the scare campaign against "fascist" Marine LePen (who moreover flubbed her major debate) put Macron in office. He had met his wife when she was teaching his theater class, and now he gets to play President.

The mission assigned to him by his sponsors was clear. He

must carry through more vigorously the “reforms” (austerity measures) already undertaken by previous governments, which had often dawdled at hastening the decline of the social State.

And beyond that, Macron was supposed to “save Europe”. Saving Europe means saving the European Union from the quagmire in which it finds itself.

This is why cutting expenses and balancing the budget is his obsession. Because that’s what he was chosen to do by the oligarchy that sponsored his candidacy. He was chosen by the financial oligarchy above all to save the European Union from threatening disintegration caused by the euro. The treaties establishing the EU and above all the common currency, the euro, have created an imbalance between member states that is unsustainable. The irony is that previous French governments, starting with Mitterrand, are largely responsible for this state of affairs. In a desperate and technically ill-examined effort to keep newly unified Germany from becoming the dominant power in Europe, the French insisted on binding Germany to France by a common currency. Reluctantly, the Germans agreed to the euro – but only on German terms. The result is that Germany has become the unwilling creditor of equally unwilling EU member states, Italy, Spain, Portugal and of course, ruined Greece. The financial gap between Germany and its southern neighbors keeps expanding, which causes ill will on all sides.

Germany doesn’t want to share economic power with states it considers irresponsible spendthrifts. So Macron’s mission is to show Germany that France, despite its flagging economy, is “responsible”, by squeezing the population in order to

pay interest on the debt. Macron's idea is that the politicians in Berlin and the bankers in Frankfurt will be so impressed that they will turn around and say, well done Emmanuel, we are ready to throw our wealth into a common pot for the benefit of all 27 Member States. And that is why Macron will stop at nothing to balance the budget, to make the Germans love him.

So far, the Macron magic is not working on the Germans, and it's driving his own people into the streets.

Or are they his own people? Does Macron really care about his run of the mill compatriots who just work for a living? The consensus is that he does not.

Macron is losing the support both of the people in the streets and the oligarchs who sponsored him. He is not getting the job done.

Macron's rabbit-out-of-the hat political ascension leaves him with little legitimacy, once the glow of glossy magazine covers wears off. With help from his friends, Macron invented his own party, *La République en Marche*, which doesn't mean much of anything but suggested action. He peopled his party with individuals from "civil society", often medium entrepreneurs with no political experience, plus a few defectors from either the Socialist or the Republican Parties, to occupy the most important government posts.

The only well-known recruit from "civil society" was the popular environmental activist, Nicolas Hulot, who was given the post of Minister of Environment, but who abruptly resigned in a radio announcement last August, citing

frustration.

Macron's strongest supporter from the political class was Gérard Collomb, Socialist Mayor of Lyons, who was given the top cabinet post of Minister of Interior, in charge of national police. But shortly after Hulot left, Collomb said he was leaving too, to go back to Lyons. Macron entreated him to stay on, but on October 3, Collomb went ahead and resigned, with a stunning statement referring to "immense problems" facing his successor. In the "difficult neighborhoods" in the suburbs of major cities, he said, the situation is "very much degraded : it's the law of the jungle that rules, drug dealers and radical Islamists have taken the place of the Republic." Such suburbs need to be "reconquered".

After such a job description, Macron was at a loss to recruit a new Interior Minister. He groped around and came up with a crony he had chosen to head his party, ex-Socialist Christophe Castaner. With a degree in criminology, Castaner's main experience qualifying him to head the national police is his close connection, back in his youth in the 1970s, with a Marseilles Mafioso, apparently due to his penchant for playing poker and drinking whiskey in illegal dens.

Saturday, November 17, demonstrators were peaceful, but resented the heavy teargas attacks. Saturday November 25, things got a big rougher, and on Saturday December 1st, all hell broke loose. With no leaders and no *service d'ordre* (militants assigned to protect the demonstrators from attacks, provocations and infiltration), it was inevitable that *casseurs* (smashers) got into the act and started

smashing things, looting shops and setting fires to trash cans, cars and even buildings. Not only in Paris, but all over France: from Marseilles to Brest, from Toulouse to Strasbourg. In the remote town of Puy en Velay, known for its chapel perched on a rock and its traditional lace-making, the Prefecture (national government authority) was set on fire. Tourist arrivals are cancelled and fancy restaurants are empty and department stores fear for their Christmas windows. The economic damages are enormous.

And yet, support for the Yellow Vests remains high, probably because people are able to distinguish between those grieved citizens and the vandals who love to wreak destruction for its own sake.

On Monday, there were suddenly fresh riots in the troubled suburbs that Collomb warned about as he retreated to Lyons. This was a new front for the national police, whose representatives let it be known that all this was getting to be much too much for them to cope with. Announcing a state of emergency is not likely to solve anything.

Macron is a bubble that has burst. The legitimacy of his authority is very much in question. Yet he was elected in 2017 for a five year term, and his party holds a large majority in parliament that makes his destitution almost impossible.

So what next? Despite having been sidelined by Macron's electoral victory in 2017, politicians of all hews are trying to recuperate the movement – but discreetly, because the Gilets Jaunes have made clear their distrust of all politicians. This is not a movement that seeks to take

power. It simply seeks redress of its grievances. The government should have listened in the first place, accepted discussions and compromise. This gets more difficult as time goes on, but nothing is impossible.

For some two or three hundred years, people one could call “left” hoped that popular movements would lead to changes for the better. Today, many leftists seem terrified of popular movements for change, convinced “populism” must lead to “fascism”. This attitude is one of many factors indicating that the changes ahead will not be led by the left as it exists today. Those who fear change will not be there to help make it happen. But change is inevitable and it need not be for the worse.

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