

Yellow-Vest Women Stake Their Claim to the Movement

Women gathered in Paris to confirm their commitment to the populist movement and women's place in the country's revolutionary history, reports Léa Bouchoucha from Paris for Consortium News.

**By Léa Bouchoucha
in Paris**

Special to Consortium News



“I’m your wife.” “I’m your mother.” “I’m your colleague.” “My child matters.” “Stop violence.” “I am your Grandma.”

Those were some of the signs carried Jan. 6 in Paris by women in the first all-female demonstration of the Yellow Vest movement.

Following [some outbreaks of violence](#) in larger-scale demonstrations on Saturday, the women's protest was cast in some social media posts, as well as [this AP account](#), as a bid to restore peace to the movement. However, the all-female protest was not responding to Saturday's events. It had been planned in advance, since Dec. 20, via [a Facebook page](#) that registered 15,000 people expressing interest and 2,000 committing to protest. The Paris demonstration on Sunday attracted several hundred, according to press accounts.

However, some women carried signs that said “stop violence,” reflecting on the violence that has marked many

demonstrations and by some estimates hurt the movement's popularity.

Although the festive mood contrasted with the often-angry demonstrations on Saturday, women at the Paris protest reiterated the same basic frustrations about everyday life becoming more of a struggle.

Framboise Clause, a mother of five who demonstrates every weekend with her daughters at their home in the northwestern Bretagne region, made a trip of 437 kilometers, about four hours by car, to join the Yellow Vest women in Paris.

No Real Revolution Without Women

"Mirabeau used to say that as long as women are not involved, there is no real revolution," said the mother of five, referring to Honoré Gabriel Riqueti, the count of Mirabeau, an early leader of the French Revolution.

Clause said she came to Paris to protest things she hears about during her work as a consultant in a job-placement center.

"People are broken because of their working environment," she said. "The world is very difficult and violent and what we need is to have a sharing, a true sharing."

Clauss earns 1,500 euros, or about \$1700 a month and her husband is currently drawing unemployment benefits of about \$900. She said she is anxious about her dwindling purchasing power.

"As the years go by, I noticed how we are eating less meat because we cannot afford it," she said "Basic products are

more expensive. Let's not even speak about the high cost of rents, which are expensive, even in the rural area where I live. Getting to the end of the month is very, very difficult. One of my daughters, who is doing professional training, had to come back to live with us because she can't afford living by her own."

As with all those quoted, Clausese spoke in French and the interview was translated.

Clausese said she left her ballot blank during the second round of the 2017 presidential election that delivered President Emmanuel Macron to office. "Today, we need a revolution. Not a revolution from war and violence but a revolution from heart and love and it is why we are here," she said.

For many detractors, Macron symbolizes the European Union and a capital-markets approach to transforming an economy that has long provided generous social services that are undergoing cutbacks and austerities.

Anaë Piat, 45, spoke with **Consortium News** during the protests. "We organized as women because women are the one who give births, hoping that the future of our children would be the best as it could possibly be."

Wearing a conical Phrygian, or liberty, cap with the tricolor, Piat said she was not protesting as a feminist, but as a Yellow Vest. "I'm here for all the Yellow Vests: men, women, children, retired. For all the people who are currently struggling."

The protests began in November and just completed their

eighth week.

An AP story described the movement as “losing wind with repeated violence at weekly demonstrations.” By contrast, *The Wall Street Journal* cast the large-scale demonstration on Jan. 5 as a sign of “staying power.”

Last week, a 33-year-old truck driver who was one of the first to call for nationwide protests was arrested, sparking outrage from leaders on different ends of the political spectrum about an abuse of power. The French daily *Le Figaro* says the arrest may have reactivated the movement.

Agence France Presse reports that an online poll conducted Jan. 2-3 by Odoxa Dentsu consulting found 55 percent of those surveyed wanted the protest movement to continue.

Poverty in Female Heads of Household

As has been noted since the start of the demonstrations, households headed by single women are among those having the hardest time meeting their living costs. Young people under 30 and single-parent families are the most affected by poverty, finds a 2018 report by *L'observatoire des inégalités*, an independent monitor of social conditions in France. About 35 percent of one-parent families live under the poverty line and 80 percent of that group are single mothers with children.

“Life is becoming more and more difficult, we can’t take children on a vacation and products covering basic needs are already too expensive,” said Piat, who is married and has three children.

The female protesters of all ages sang the French national

anthem “La Marseillaise” and chanted anti-Macron slogans. They gathered Sunday morning on the steps of the Opera Bastille, which overlooks the symbolic Place de la Bastille, site of the Bastille prison that was stormed by revolutionaries between 1789 and 1790.

In a phone interview before the demonstration, Magali Della Sudda, a political science researcher at the French National Center for Scientific Research, the largest governmental research organization in France, reflected on French women’s role in the country’s revolutionary history. “During the French revolution, women were here among the revolutionaries. They have been there throughout the 19th Century, such as the Commune of Paris in 1871 and later on in the different social struggles of the inter-war period.”

Sudda said the women are more visible today in the Yellow Vest movement. “Because of the strong social dimension of the conflict and because the movement is outside all political structures and union organizations, people are forced to turn their attention to the ‘ordinary’ participants, including women.”

Sudda said women in the Yellow Vest movement span the social and economic strata. “We find nurses, care givers, women who work in schools with children,” she said.

Sudda points to the symbolic significance of the songs and chants heard during the women’s Yellow Vests protest on Sunday. “Women have always sung and vocalized with spirit in the demonstrations,” she said. “Their chants insist on solidarity, fraternity and what is done in common.”

Léa Bouchoucha is a multimedia journalist currently based in Paris. Her work has appeared in Vogue U.S, the Huffington Post, NPR, CNN International, Women's eNews, Euronews, Elle, Le Figaro. She has reported from Turkey on Syrian refugees and LGBT rights and from Israel, where she was working as a news editor and reporter at the international news channel I24 News.

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The Euro-Establishment's Fear of Populism

French protesters are furious with EU champion Emmanuel Macron while Rome battles Brussels over its budget. Amid all this, Andrew Spannaus discusses why organized labor isn't seizing the moment.

Yellow Vests, Italian Budget Battles & Silent Labor Unions

By [Andrew Spannaus](#)

in Milan

Special to Consortium News



From the European Union's standpoint, the historic levels of social unrest confronting French President Emmanuel Macron, one of its leading champions, came at a delicate moment in its dealings with Italy.

Since mid-September, the European Commission, the EU's executive body, has been battling with Italy over its budget. The populist government in Rome—led by the Five-Star Movement, or M5S, and the League—have decided to stimulate the economy by giving money to the poor, lowering taxes and increasing public investment.

With an assist from financial markets that are penalizing Italian government bonds, the Commission has been threatening an “excessive deficit procedure” if Italy doesn't reduce spending and resume measures to balance its budget. In theory this austerity policy will make the country more stable and efficient. But the last 10 years have demonstrated that cutting the budget and raising taxes have depressed economic activity, with the effect of making people poorer. Italy's new political leaders are determined to show they can break through the resistance to public stimulus of the economy.

The French Yellow Vest protests came just in time to alleviate some of the pressure on the Italians, allowing the M5S and League leaders to point out the hypocrisy of letting France run a budget deficit of over 3 percent while pushing Italy to go below 1.5 percent. “If the deficit/GDP rules apply to Italy, I expect they should apply to Macron as well,” Italian Deputy Prime Minister Luigi Di Maio said on Dec. 11, Reuters reports.

The response from pro-austerity factions within Italy and the European Commission is that Italy has a larger public debt and benefits from less market confidence.

EU Tries to Hold Line

Nonetheless, the European Commission showed a bit of flexibility this week, provisionally accepting a budget deficit of slightly over 2 percent. The Italians also ceded ground by reducing investments and the funds allocated to their signature projects to alleviate poverty and help pensioners. Thus the European Commission is still fighting to defend its line of budget orthodoxy, lest the floodgates open to uncontrollable rebellion.

Where are the unions?

In France, union membership is very low, but the unions there still have considerable power in collective bargaining and have demonstrated the ability to paralyze the country, at times more so than in Italy, where membership is much higher. France's unions, however, do not seem to be identifying in any major way with the discontent, although there have been some sightings. The SocialistWorker.org reports that "France's biggest union coalition, the General Confederation of Workers, called for a day of general mobilization on December 14, and in some regions, like Ile-de-France, this garnered support from other unions and federations."

But given the EU's embrace of austerity policies and "labor flexibility"—meaning the ability to fire people more easily and keep wages low—organized labor isn't taking the central position against the effects of globalization that might be

expected. Unions have been mostly absent from the spontaneous protests in France and the rising populist movements in Italy and elsewhere around Europe.

Protecting Institutions

The dilemma for some unions is that while they aim to defend workers by battling wage and benefit cuts that are justified by the need to compete on global markets they fear feeding populist movements that might challenge the legitimacy of European institutions and the politicians who back them.

An example of this contradiction comes from Italian labor leader Susanna Camusso, head of the [Italian General Confederation of Labour](#), or CGIL, the country's largest union, dating to 1906.

In an interview with foreign journalists in Milan on Nov. 19, Camusso focused on unstable working conditions that force workers to accept multiple short-term contracts that offer no job security. She also raised some broad demographic inequities; between young and old, men and women, and different geographic areas.

But when asked if organized labor was wrong to have supported the EU economic policies from the start—by not opposing the budget rules at the root of current demands for spending cuts—Camusso denied any culpability. “We are pro-European and continue to be convinced supporters of Europe,” she said. “Our country made sacrifices affecting workers, but joining the monetary union and the Euro was the right choice. Not only because we are a founding country, but because Europe has meant peace for many years.”

This is the type of argument that voters across the continent are increasingly rejecting; the notion that calling for a fundamental change in EU policies automatically means a return to the wars of past centuries.

Free-Market Europe

It is indisputable that cooperation has helped bring European nations together since the end of World War II, yet it is also clear that the neoliberal policies introduced in the 1990s, starting with massive budget cuts and the opening of numerous sectors to speculative capital through privatization and liberalization, changed the nature of Europe, cementing the power of the “free market,” pro-globalization consensus that has produced negative effects for so many.

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Camusso, who is also a candidate for secretary general of the World Federation of Trade Unions, does not shy away from criticizing the difficulties created by such policies. She attacks austerity policies that reduce pensions, cut funds for health care and erode public infrastructure. Yet by refusing to admit the neoliberal foundations of EU policies starting at least 25 years ago—policies based on monetary parameters, rather than the health of productive activities in the real economy—she ties the unions’ hands in fighting for more decisive change.

While organized labor restrains itself, both right- and left-wing populists take the helm on EU on economic issues, many claiming they are not anti-European as such, but merely

determined to stop the austerity policies that have done so much harm to the population.

This was seen in the French presidential elections in 2017, when both Marine Le Pen, on the Right, and Jean-Luc Mélenchon, on the Left, called for renegotiating the EU treaties to abandon the notion of “free trade” that has harmed the productive economy.

In the 2016 U.S. elections, a partisan shift in votes from union households was a critical factor in President Donald Trump’s victory in key battleground states such as Ohio and Michigan.

The underlying issues driving the populist revolt are economic and financial globalization and their effects on people’s living standards. Shying away from criticizing the neoliberal policies ingrained in Western institutions is merely a recipe for further unrest, with potentially dangerous consequences.

When Macron came from seemingly nowhere to defeat Le Pen in the May 2017 run-off, he became the youngest president in French history. He was hailed as the savior of the European Union, a centrist who succeeded in beating back the populists. As such, he came to symbolize the idea that the EU defends peace and democracy against the racists and xenophobes. But the spontaneous insurgency of the anti-establishment Yellow Vest movement suggests the real threats to social stability are the sheer hardships—and loss of living standards—suffered by large numbers of people.

Andrew Spannaus is a journalist and strategic analyst based

in Milan. He was elected chairman of the Milan Foreign Press Association in March 2018. He has published the books “Perché vince Trump” (“Why Trump is Winning” – June 2016) and “La rivolta degli elettori” (“The Revolt of the Voters” – July 2017).

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