

Yellow Vest Movement Not Yet Changing Its Color to Green

From Paris, Léa Bouchoucha reports for **Consortium News** on two sets of demonstrators, some of whom are mingling while others keep a distance.

By **Léa Bouchoucha**
in Paris

Special to Consortium News



Some had hoped the two marches in Paris last Saturday— one focused on global warming and the other representing the 18th straight weekend of Yellow Vest protests – would join forces and help unite environmental activism with social equity.

On March 8, Cyril Dion, a well-known documentary film maker and environmental writer, gave a joint interview to **Le Parisien** with Priscillia Ludosky, considered one of the founders of the Yellow Vest movement, in which they both encouraged protesters to march together.

To an extent that happened. Yellow vests were a common sight in the climate demonstrations on Saturday. And nongovernmental groups – Greenpeace France, the Nicolas Hulot Foundation, SOS Racisme, Friends of the Earth, 350.org and Alternatiba – voiced a fusion of environmental and economic demands. “Time to change industrial, political and economic systems, to protect the environment, society and individuals,” was a typical message expressed on one banner.

The contrasts between the two demonstrations, however, wound up drawing the main **press attention**. Coverage by outlets

such as *Reuters* and the *Associated Press* emphasized how the march on climate change – which drew around 45,000 in Paris, according to media estimates – was peaceful and included movie stars. The smaller Yellow Vest demonstration in the capital, estimated at around 10,000, was marked by rioting and vandalism.

Some Yellow Vests disagree with violence in demonstrations. But plenty of images have spread on social media that show a few protesters posing proudly in front of vandalized, expensive restaurants and luxury shops along the Champs-Élysées Avenue.

A strong majority of French – 84 percent of those polled – condemned the violence in a survey released March 20 by Elabe, an independent consultancy.

‘Part of the Game’

Stephanie Albinet, who wore a yellow vest to Saturday’s climate demonstration, would have been in the minority of that polling group. She was sanguine about the looting and police confrontations she’d personally witnessed at another point that day along Champs-Élysées. “That’s part of the game I would say. At some point we should stop treating the people like fools.”

Consortium News asked Albinet about another criticism of Yellow Vests: that they are too tolerant of xenophobia and bigotry.

“Yellow vests are not all anti-Semitic, racist, violent people,” Albinet responded. “They are people like me who for the past four months have finally found hope in seeing the

population wake up. For the past 25 years I did not give a crap about France, but now I feel like a patriot for the first time.”

Francois Amadieu, a professor at Pantheon Sorbonne University who studies social movements, noted in a phone interview from his Paris office that protest violence can achieve results. “It’s classical and always an issue in France,” he told **Consortium News**. “In terms of timing. French executive power has often made concessions under pressure. It was for instance the case on Dec. 10 when the government announced some measures after two very violent Saturday protests.”

Black Bloc Attention

[France24](#) reports that the government has attributed the violence to extreme elements – so-called *casseurs* – who have infiltrated the movement from both the left and right. The episode is drawing public attention to “black bloc” anarchists who have been associated with the most extreme violence.

Amadieu said that black bloc militants aren’t acting out of spontaneous emotions. “They have long theorized that violence and vandalism will launch a state reaction by the police. This repression, in the form of tear gas and so on will gradually cause protestors to become more radicalized and understand this violence. Black bloc theory also assumes that people become bored in authorized protests and when there is spillover [into criminal behavior] people stop being bored and become motivated to reclaim the streets, and so forth.”

The government is planning to militarize its response to Yellow Vest demonstrations and deploy French soldiers to prevent further violence by Yellow Vest demonstrators, media outlets are reporting.

Despite some mingling of climate and Yellow Vest protesters, Amadieu said it was significant that a core of Yellow Vests refrained from joining the climate march. "Usually, this convergence does not work out as it is not the same sociology," he said.

Hoping to Unite

Corentin Durand, a 26-year-old physics post-graduate student who wore a yellow vest to the climate march, hopes the two movements are merging. "We should fight a battle on two fronts," he said Saturday as the climate protest moved through the city's Grands Boulevard neighborhood. "I can't deal with the fact that our society is fully dependent on people who work very hard every day to make ends meet. It's intolerable," Durand said. "I hope that fighting climate change will bring social justice for everybody."

Durand said his apprehensions about global warming affect his everyday routine. "All day long, in each of my actions; when I turned on the light or the tap, I'm wondering how it would impact the environment. I never ride in elevators, always take public transit and bike and never get on a plane."

Public transit, however, is patchy in rural France. And when President Emanuel Macron tried to initiate his climate-protection agenda by raising fuel prices, he notoriously ignited the Yellow Vest movement, which sent a loud message

not to expect low-income people, already struggling to pay their bills, to pay a disproportionate price for climate mitigation.

In response to Yellow Vest pressure, Macron on Jan. 15. launched a two-month-long “big debate” of listening tours and town halls and citizen input via booklets of complaints. Some thought the process had been lulling the Yellow Vests into complacency, but Saturday’s protests countered that impression.

66 Proposals

Attempts to make climate policy more socially equitable are coinciding with Yellow Vest pressures on the Macron government. On March 5 in the context of the “big debate,” 19 nongovernmental organizations presented the government with 66 proposals as part of a new ecology and social compact to ensure the country’s environmental transition program is done more equitably.

One champion of this effort is Nicolas Hulot, a former environment minister and longtime campaigner who resigned on live radio on Aug. 28 out of impatience with the government’s foot dragging on climate and other goals.

Laurent Berger, a prominent unionist, is also aligned with the effort. “There is no contradiction between social consciousness and the respect of the environment,” [Berger told *Le Monde*](#). “In our pact, we find environmental organizations, unions, anti-poverty, housing, youth associations and popular education movements.”

In the same article, Hulot promoted “big bang” reform of a

tax system skewed in favor of the affluent. “The current system is unfair, and the burden is not equally shared,” Hulot is quoted as saying.

Stéphane Cuttaïa lives in rural France, the stronghold of the anti-system Yellow Vest movement that generally regards the Macron government as indifferent to its concerns and preoccupied with European Union affairs and urban centers of wealth.

“We’re very interested in revitalizing the local economy,” Cuttaïa said by phone this week from his home in the Île-de-France region. “The Yellow Vests speak to this. What we see today in France is that there are large cities –Paris, Lyon, Bordeaux, Marseille – and then there are many rural and semi-rural territories where public services and trade have disappeared. Residents here are forced to go long distances to shop, see a doctor. It is generating many energy costs.”

‘Green Vests’

Cuttaïa runs [C’est déjà ça](#) – a café that he describes as providing a community center in the small town of Saâcy-sur-Marne, around 75 kilometers from Paris. In November, he used social media networks to launch Green Vests, a largely citizen initiative that hopes to mix Yellow-Vest and “green” environmental issues. The Green Vests are now circulating [an online petition](#) with 30 proposals. One of those proposals is free public transportation in rural areas; a more equitable approach to reducing emissions than Macron’s attempt to raise fuel prices.

“We recognize our social concerns in the Yellow Vest movement, but we think that measures regarding ecological

emergency are very limited,” Cuttaia said. “We want to create a bridge between the different organizations mobilized on behalf of climate deregulations, biological exterminations and social claims.”

Bernard Guericolas, a 75-year-old retiree who joined the environment protests in Paris on Saturday, regrets the years that have been lost to inattention and inaction on global warming. “When I was young, I was happy to take a plane ride,” Guericolas said. “I would have loved to own a big car had I been able to afford one. But I had it all wrong. We were not aware of what we did. In my mind, it’s the role of politicians to anticipate and it is what they are paid to do. At the end, we (our generation) are guilty, but we are not accountable.”

Along with 2 million other French people so far, Guericolas signed an [online petition](#) in support of the lawsuit that several nongovernmental groups filed on March 14 against the government for climate inaction.

The lawsuit, which is [similar to litigation](#) confronting several other governments around the world, is probably more important politically than legally, says Arnaud Gossement, a professor at Sorbonne University in Paris who specializes in environmental law and spoke by phone. “The lawsuit helped to stir the mass mobilization we saw this weekend, but from a legal point of view, it’s more complicated.” For one thing, Gossement said, a judge could dismiss the case. And if the case goes forward, it could take several years. “And we do not have time to wait.”

That sense of urgency – long pent up among climate activists

– is motivating young people worldwide to follow the lead of the 16-year-old Swedish activist Greta Thunberg, who last year began cutting school, holding solitary demonstrations outside the Swedish parliament and questioning the point of schoolwork when the future of humanity looked so uncertain.

In a scathing speech at a UN climate conference – during which she told participants “our civilization is being sacrificed so a very small number of people can continue making enormous amounts of money”–she became an international sensation and role model.

About three months ago, some French high school students began cutting school on Fridays to join climate demonstrations.

On Friday, March 15, Eponine Bob was one of them as she joined the [Global Student Strike](#) march in Paris. “I’m here because our generation is going to live with the effects of global warming, ” the teenager told **Consortium News**. “People are afraid.”

Bob said she tries to do her best to consider her personal effect on the environment in everyday life. “But in the end, it’s not families that pollute the most. It’s [corporate] lobbies and big companies,” she said. “I don’t think that there is enough regulation and it’s become a real issue.”

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

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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.

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“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, Clause spoke in French and the interview was translated.

Clause 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.”

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