

GILETS JAUNES: the first attempts at mobilising “the people” for a strong state against the proletariat

Starting off in a good-natured way around tax-related demands channelled into a refusal of an increase in the price of fuel, more particularly diesel, making its first national appearance on 17 November, the *Gilets jaunes* agitation covered several administrative regions of the French Republic, three times, 24 November, 1 December and 7 December.

THE GILETS JAUNES, A HAPPY HUNTING GROUND FOR THE NATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY BRIGADE

The *Gilets jaunes* were quickly supported by the main “sovereignist”¹ oppositionists in the country, the *Rassemblement national* of Marine Le Pen² and *la France insoumise* of Jean-Luc Mélenchon³. The PCF⁴, the CGT⁵ and SUD⁶ have hesitated about joining the *Gilets jaunes* using the excuse of secondary fine distinctions. As for the little fascist/Nazi groups, they have plunged into the *Gilets jaunes* right from their creation. Finally, the so-called autonomes and “insurrectionists” have in their turn seized the opportunity

¹ See: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Souverainism>

² The new name for the former Front national, an extreme-right organisation, sister of the League of Matteo Salvini in Italy and the Fidesz of Viktor Orbán in Hungary, close to Putin’s Russia.

³ Social-nationalist organisation coming out of the Socialist Party and the Trotskyists, close to Podemos in Spain, the Chavez/Maduro regime in Venezuela and to Putin’s foreign policy.

⁴ The old Stalinist and “patriotic” French Communist Party.

⁵ The main French trade union confederation, close to *la France insoumise* and the PCF.

⁶ The confederation created by, amongst others, the Trotskyists of the LCR and the anarcho semi-Trotskyists of *Alternative libertaire*.

to experience once again their fundamental inability to exercise force against the Police, after the fascists/Nazis opened the way for them during the first Paris gathering on Saturday 24 November.

THE GILETS JAUNES, PRODUCT OF THE FISCAL CRISIS

The *Gilets jaunes* are above all a product of the fiscal crisis of various states which followed the gravest world financial crisis of capitalism since the 1930s, which began in 2007/2008 with the so-called *subprime* crisis. It was a crisis in two main stages, the crisis of the banking system of the developed capitalist countries followed by the fiscal crisis of their states which was translated into a reduction of expenditure on social protection, that is to say the hoarding by the state of a significant portion of the indirect wage (social security, pensions, unemployment insurance etc.) by means of taxation. This hoarding served to restore some order to the states’ balance sheets and to refinance the system of credit, invalidated by the crisis of derived financial products and put in danger by the crisis of sovereign debt.

THE GILETS JAUNES, A CONSEQUENCE OF THE ABSENCE OF WORKERS’ STRUGGLES

The *Gilets jaunes* are also the product of the prolonged absence of significant struggles around wages. This absence is itself the direct consequence of the historic defeat of the workers’ autonomy seen in the 1970s and numerous attempts at a massive resurgence of the class struggle in the ‘80s

and '90s in the new advanced capitalist countries. The casualization of the labour market everywhere in the world with the generalisation of the figure of the poor and precarious labourer, and the breaking of the contractual frameworks of wage labour with the reappearance of the figure of the jobber, disguised as self-employed and/or as an independent worker. Isolated workers, notably those in small companies, and casualties workers participate in the Gilets jaunes.

Unfortunately, their mobilisation is not on the basis of class positions. These proletarians have thus expressed their inability to organise and to fight against the bosses in workplaces. This impotence, which certainly has an objective base in the growing dislocation of productive territories, is transformed into aggression against the forces of order and the symbols of the state. It's a bit of a paradox for a rebellion which demands the recognition and protection of the state....

THE GILETS JAUNES, A SOCIAL REACTIONARY INTERCLASS BLOC

The fiscal crisis has not only hit proletarians. It has accelerated the proletarianisation of residual sectors of the petty bourgeoisie in the developed capitalist countries such as artisans, shopkeepers, individual entrepreneurs and certain pauperised liberal professions. Many small bosses have also lost out from the fiscal crisis and the banking crisis. And let's not forget the people who are no longer in the labour market, including pensioners (who are certainly not all proletarians) and the so-called long-term unemployed. In this general context the increase in taxes, deductions and various contributions has had the capacity to create a heterogeneous bloc of segments of various classes which are different and historically antagonistic. Taxation is always a compost of choice for constituting the people

around the national flag, the demand for more of a state and a direct relation between the Head of State and the "people fused together". The cry which goes up, including from the most weakened fractions of the proletariat, is a demand for protection in the face of the consequences of the global financial crisis. It's a demand for protection which creates an illusory sentiment of belonging and of communion with the sectors of civil society which must be considered as enemies and dealt with accordingly.

THE GILETS JAUNES POLITICISE THEIR ACTION TO CONSTITUTE THEMSELVES AS THE PEOPLE

Meanwhile, the Gilets jaunes rebellion transformed itself from a protest against tax and loss of purchasing power into a sort of global political programme by the addition of demands like the return of seven-year presidencies, the reinforcement of the right to referendums, the expulsion of illegal immigrants, defence of "made in France" and the reduction of pay for elected officials. The programme which emerges carries within it all the characteristics of sovereigntist programmes already seen in other countries. In one phrase, they demand a greater role for the state, and its summit in particular, in a direct link with the people in revolt. In fact, it's a perfect synthesis of the objectives of the *Rassemblement national* and *la France insoumise*. It doesn't matter much if some participants in the rebellion don't find themselves in complete agreement with these points, because these people have not been in a position to make explicit their potentially different or divergent visions. The rejection of "politics" professed by the Gilets jaunes is certainly a critique in acts of representative democracy. But this critique is built on a reactionary and nationalist base. In the epoch of nationalism's advance, the phenomenon of the Gilets jaunes must be read as the first substantial attempt in France, however

confused and uncoordinated, to constitute “on the spot” the people. If they continue, phenomena of this type could constitute an indispensable (but not sufficient) condition for the formalisation of mass fascist movements capable of overturning, more or less violently, the dominant institutional form of the dictatorship of capital in the advanced countries, modern representative democracy.

THE GILETS JAUNES, A POLITICAL BYPRODUCT OF THE FIFTH REPUBLIC

The Gilets jaunes have made “*Macron resign*” into their unifying slogan. By doing that they are in line with the dialectic proper to the Fifth Republic, product of the institutional *coup d'État* of 13 May 1958. The direct relation between the people and the Head of State is in effect the keystone of its Constitution. During the electoral campaign of 2017, the candidate Emmanuel Macron ceaselessly raised three basic themes which made his election possible: the restoration of the presidency of the Republic with its original prerogatives; the rejection of professional politicians of all kinds; the significant reduction of taxes for everyone. These three central themes of Emmanuel Macron’s campaign are very much present within the Gilets jaunes.

Like a pyromaniac fireman, the President of the Republic pays the costs of the electoral promises which he didn’t keep. These electoral promises were taken at their word by the disillusioned rebels of the Gilets jaunes of today who thus show themselves to be ideologically close to the present government. Their rebellion is not the expression of any revolutionary dynamic. Worse, it could pave the way for the arrival of a sovereigntism to the power ten which follows the lead of Emmanuel Macron, without contest the best representative of the most advanced fraction of the dominant

classes. If this is what happens then something will take shape in France similar to what has already happened in Italy.

In 2012, Italy was agitated by the movement of the *Forconi* (forks)⁷. Launched in Sicily by the bosses of small trucking companies and by the peasants, the *Forconi* also started out by blocking roads. The objective: to rise up against the ruling class “*who want to make us pay the bill*”, against “*the hypocrisy of our politicians*” and for a reduction in the price of fuel and insurance. As in France, this phenomenon was actively supported by the fascists and the sovereigntists of the time and even by some “autonomes” in the image of the Askatasuna social centre in Turin, itself close to NO TAV (the movement which opposes the construction of a high-speed rail line between Turin and Lyon).

THE GILETS JAUNES, CHOICE AUXILIARIES OF THE STATE

The Gilets jaunes demand that the state defends their incomes and their assets. The theatrical violence changes nothing in terms of their character of profound submission to the state and capital. On the contrary it only serves to spread the illusion of a movement which is offensive, massive and anti-capitalist. Meanwhile, between the various “acts” of the four Saturdays in a row, the number of Gilets jaunes present at the road blockades has declined. Violence is scarcely in itself a measure of proletarian offensive and even less of a practical critique of the state.

⁷ To understand the similarities and differences between the *Forconi* movement, M5S and the Gilets jaunes, we recommend the excellent text “*Les Gilets jaunes à la lumière de l’expérience italienne*” [“The Gilets jaunes in the light of the Italian experience”] by the Athéné Nyctalope collective, available here: <https://paris-luttes.info/les-gilets-jaunes-a-la-lumiere-de-11185>

The exercise of autonomous force by the workers has nothing in common with the spectacle of the devastation of abstract territories of production and social reproduction.

City centres are a tremendous backdrop for television and the internet but they are totally opaque and disembodied when it is a matter of hitting the value chain of capital. The looting and damage caused to these opulent town centres are acts foreign to and sometimes even hostile to the hundreds of thousands of workers, most often poor, who are exploited there. The protagonists of these violent actions act as warriors against the future offensive struggles of the proletariat, against its autonomy, against its struggle against exploitation and oppression. They must be considered as auxiliaries of the armed forces of the bourgeoisie and the objective props of capital's order and its state.

THE PROLETARIAT AGAINST THE PEOPLE

In conclusion, the attitude of communists in the face of the tax revolt and the demand for protection addressed to the state must be firm. Communists, militants of the workers' cause, must work against the people and for proletarian autonomy, for the development of offensive struggles around wages and against working conditions imposed by capital. Struggles which must root themselves and become massive first of all in the territories of production and social reproduction, in the factories, in offices, in warehouses, in working class neighbourhoods. Right now, this perspective is not what is being expressed. The *Gilets jaunes* do not in any way constitute a palliative, or even less "*a new form of anti-capitalist antagonism*". Within the state, they are, on the contrary, a restraint and just one more political enemy.
