

‘Yellow Vest’ Protests Show the Future Belongs To Activists Who Oppose the Globalist System

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They were unexpected and yet inevitable. The “yellow vests movement,” the *mouvement des gilets jaunes*, has terrified the mainstream media and inspired populists around the world since it took to the streets in mid-November 2018. The ostensible main grievance was an increase in the fuel tax, a tax that would disproportionately affect rural and suburban dwellers that rely on auto transportation. Protesters donned the iconic yellow vests because French law requires all drivers to keep such a garment in their car or truck. Yet the protests were about far more than a simple fuel tax. The protests point the way to the post-neoliberal future of the West, a future that will be shaped by either a truly populist nationalism or a resurgent socialism.

As of this writing, Macron has already made important concessions to the protesters, including raising the minimum wage and abolishing certain unpopular taxes. Nonetheless, his popularity continued to decline even after these sops. Yet describing exactly what the movement wants is difficult. Though some American conservatives might rejoice at the idea of protests against a fuel tax intended to fight climate change, the movement is clearly focused on economic populism.

Various demands circulated by supposed representatives of the “Yellow Vests” include raising taxes on the wealthy (while lowering them on workers), the abolition of the Senate, an end to austerity programs, and the prohibition of outsourcing. There is firm opposition to privatization and calls for more subsidies for workers. On immigration, there are simultaneous demands for better treatment of asylum seekers but also more “integration,” an implied critique of non-white French residents.

According to a study of the yellow vests, about equal numbers of them voted for Marine Le Pen or the leftist Jean-Luc Mélenchon in the most recent presiden-

tial election, with large numbers having supported no one. These protesters are united for now, but coalescing into one movement could prove difficult. There is some discussion of them forming a political party and running in the upcoming European Parliament elections. However, the likely result would be to strengthen Macron, as polls show Marine Le Pen’s National Rally (the rebranded National Front) and the leftist France Unbowed party would both suffer the most from a new populist force. When one discusses the yellow vests, one must also ask *which* yellow vests, as the first wave of the protests were dominated by rural whites, with more non-white urban protesters joining the second wave. Scott McConnell of *The American Conservative* warned that “the anti-tax protesters are being replaced by something closer to antifa” in mid-December.

Yet there is an underlying logic to all of this—broadly speaking, the yellow vests want measures against income inequality, progressive tax structures, more direct democracy, and an end to the bias of the government towards urban centers at the expense of rural communities. There was some of this crossover in the 2016 Trump campaign as well, with candidate Trump appealing to some populist leftists and “Bernie Bros” on issues like a noninterventionist foreign policy, opposition to outsourcing and the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and criticism of institutions like Goldman Sachs. While candidate Trump may have sounded these themes, President Trump has largely governed like a traditional Republican conservative, thus squandering the opportunity for a true populist agenda.

However, the Italian government, in which the nationalist Lega Party and the populist, economically progressive Five Star Movement have joined forces, are one possible model of how a hypothetical yellow vest government would look. According to one poll, the political party with the highest percentage of people self-identifying as yellow vests is Marine Le Pen’s National Rally. A poll taken in late November also showed all but universal support for the movement among National Rally voters. While Communists, antifa, and anarchists are likely present among the yellow vests, many nationalists are also undoubtedly present.

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For that reason the “far right” has been used as a means by both journalists and the French government to scare people away from the movement. During the second week of demonstrations, the French government actually blamed Marine Le Pen for the protests, with Interior Minister Christophe Castaner complaining of the “ultra-right putting up barriers.” “France’s far right sees gold in yellow vest movement,” screamed a December 16, 2018, article in *The New York Times*, warning of nationalist politicians backing the group and right-wing activists “infiltrating” the demonstrations. Of course, less than two weeks earlier on December 5, Adam Nossiter wrote in *The New York Times* that “nationalism is not on the agenda” in the protests. Yet if enough National Rally demonstrators say it is, it will be. More importantly, the narrative being promoted by the mainstream media is that Macron is the great champion of the European Union, and that if he is defeated, the “far-right” will be the main beneficiary.

Macron himself claimed to be “neither of the left nor the right” when he ran for office, but he has emerged as a classic Blairite neoliberal. His media popularity is partially explained because of his strong opposition to nationalism. When Macron described nationalism as “the betrayal of patriotism” to the face of President Trump, journalists celebrated. The protests began about a week later. Perhaps simply to stop Trump and other nationalists, many journalists are desperate to defend the beleaguered government of Macron, regardless of the grievances of the French people.

For example, Natalie Nougayrède of *The Guardian* desperately called for people to help Macron “for Europe’s sake,” lest France follow the path of Italy or Hungary into the “far right.” “There can be no European democratic project or social justice without a European democratic France,” she moaned. “If Macron Fails, Europe Fails,” wrote Henrik Enderlein in *Der Spiegel*, calling for German assistance to Macron and also warning of the “Italian crisis,” by which he evidently meant the danger of a nationalist government. Thomas Friedman, the most predictable of all neoliberal pundits, similarly invoked Italy and Russia and quoted Dominique Mosi’s warning that France “is the last barrier protecting the European idea” because “if Macron fails, it can bring the end of Europe.”

There are also efforts at narrative policing similar to what occurred in the United States after Donald Trump’s election. In early December, *Buzzfeed* blamed the riots not on anger against the political class, but on Facebook switching an algorithm to focus on local news, thus allowing so-called “anger groups” organized around local grievances to grow in popularity. “How do

you turn it off?” reads the subtitle, with the implication that these protests could be prevented with sufficiently draconian social media management. Like American journalists and Democrats, the French government is also blaming Russia for the protests. The French government has opened a probe because 600 Twitter accounts “known to promote Kremlin views” used the hashtag #giletsjaunes. Marine Le Pen has mocked such “conspiracy theories.” However, Claire Berlinski at *Haaretz*, among other journalists, warn that Russia, though it did not create the movement, is “exacerbate[ing]” the “conflicts and divisions in open societies” like the yellow vest protests on social media.

Yet the “conflicts and divisions in open societies” will only grow more intensive in the years to come. Looming over everything is the existential issue of immigration. Mass immigration exacerbates income inequality, environmental destruction, wage stagnation, and civil strife far more than any Russian disinformation campaign. Any movement interested in seriously confronting such problems, including the yellow vests, must ultimately confront the issue of immigration restriction. However, that doesn’t mean immigration patriotism is inevitably destined to triumph in France or anywhere else.

Ultimately, it comes down to which side gives direction to the rising movement against neoliberalism. The socialists at *Jacobin* essentially admitted in their endorsement of the protests that leftists needed to be involved simply to prevent Marine Le Pen or other nationalists from shaping the direction of the movement. If the open borders globalists are the enemy, the radical socialists are competitors. Nationalism, built on love for tradition, culture, and homeland, can preserve private property while still protecting workers’ rights, checking income inequality, and preserving public order. Yet if nationalists do not seriously appeal to those economically as well as demographically dispossessed by globalist economics, socialists may well claim the future by default.

Just as no progressive can seriously help workers without stopping mass immigration, no nationalist can seriously defend his or her country without confronting the social problems created by the current order of neoliberalism. From the streets of Paris to the government chambers of Rome, current events show that a populism that combines pro-worker economics and nationalist cultural policies can overturn the globalist system that is destroying the West. The future doesn’t belong to those who want to save this system from itself. It belongs to those who will take the lead in overthrowing it. Let’s hope it’s our side. ■