

The French take to the barricades

Benoit Martin Wednesday, November 28, 2018 Morning Star (daily paper UK)

Unprecedented social media mobilisation has paralysed France in response to a rise in fuel prices. BENOIT MARTIN reports



THE WRITING IS ON THE PLACARD: “Macron, destitution, government resignation, system, abolition”

TENS of thousands people demonstrated in Paris on Saturday to demand the resignation of President Macron. They first protested on the Champs Elysees and were violently repressed by the police.

Some tried to set up barricades and the protest continued later in the streets of Paris. This was the culmination of week-long actions throughout France.

No-one was expecting the grassroots protests triggered by the rise in fuel prices — 14 per cent in a year — to grow after its first day. Entirely organised through social media (Facebook page La France en colere) and without any input from political parties, unions or established organisations, the protest movement began on November 19 with a day of “road blockades.” The press reported that 283,000 took part and that they brought France to a stand-still.

After the 19th, the blockades of key motorways and roundabouts continued. They expanded to oil refineries and, two days later, many garages had run out of petrol.

The protesters are called “gilets jaunes” (yellow vests) because of the high-visibility vests they wear. Motorists joining the movement are displaying such vests on their dashboards — about one in four cars display them.

I met Severine, 44, who is on sick leave and lives in Capestang, a village of 2,000 people in the south. “I have never joined any protest before,” she admits.

“It’s extraordinary because there are no politicians or trade unions telling us what to do. This is people, just people. I feel we are in a revolution, it’s very exciting.”

Several newspapers have reported that a great number of the organisers have never done this before.

The movement has adopted several tactics — blocking access and departure points at the motorway tolls, letting cars go without paying the toll, hooding speed cameras and targeting commercial centres.

“When we do the blockades, we speak to the motorists, we offer them coffee,” explains Severine. “People understand, they agree with what we do.”

Other demands have now been added and can be read on Facebook. They revolve around the financial burden that taxes and high prices impose on the vast majority of the population. Some also demand higher minimum wages, return of the tax on big fortunes recently abolished by Macron and, boldly, the resignation of his government.

The movement is a “ras-le-bol,” a “we’ve had enough” exasperation with impoverishment.

The Establishment, both government and media, has responded with scorn, accusing people of anti-ecologism for opposing high taxes on fuel when for most of them driving a car to work is not a choice.

“It can cost 200 to 300 euros a month to go to work. With a monthly minimum wage of €1,188, it’s just impossible.”

After the Paris actions and despite the repression, the blockades and the protest are not about to end according to the numerous calls on social media. Major protests have also been taking place on the island of Reunion, an overseas French department.

Benoit Martin is a member of Payday, a network of men working with the Global Women’s Strike.