

How the Yellow Vest Movement Survived into 2019

A Chronicle from December 8, 2018 to January 5, 2019

CrimethInc.

January 9, 2019

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Since November 2018, the yellow vest movement has created a political crisis in France and posed thorny questions to radicals worldwide. In the following report, we detail the yellow vest actions from December 8, 2018 to January 5, 2019, recounting how the yellow vest movement defied the calendar—that age-old device for limiting revolutionary movements. Tomorrow, in our next article, we will step back to analyze the different currents within the movement and implications they hold for anarchists, environmentalists, and everyone else who seeks a world without oppression.

The yellow vest movement has posed the most serious threat to President Macron since he came to power in 2016. The unrest began as a grassroots response to the government’s proposal to increase taxes for “ecological” purposes and quickly spread to encompass many different groups and agendas. Thanks to its protean aspect, but also its supposedly “apolitical” character, the movement has brought people together around shared tactics and frustrations, as the Occupy movement once did.

Since November, the yellow vest movement has become a battleground for many different political parties and groups, especially populists and nationalists. As the movement gained momentum and clashes with the police intensified, anarchists and other rebels joined in, fighting on multiple fronts—against the state, but also against reactionary groups active on the streets. Anarchists attempted to reorient the movement towards more systemic solutions, to diminish the influence and presence of the far-right, and to create connections between different groups and potential allies. The outcome of these efforts remains uncertain.

After weeks of desperately trying to establish dialogue in order to pacify the situation, the government appeared to have finally regained control of the situation by presenting concessions on December 10, 2018. At that time, the lack of clear political objectives, the repression of the previous weeks, and above all the approach of the Christmas holidays seemed to have brought the yellow vest movement to an impasse.

Several weeks later, following a day of action involving at least 50,000 people on Saturday, January 5, the yellow vest movement remains alive. Another nationwide day of action is called for January 12. Yet the movement is bitterly divided over tactics, goals, values, and structure. The most determined participants have been abandoned by legalists and pacifists eager to negotiate with the government; as often occurs, a major part of the grassroots movement is slowly evolving into something more institutionalized. Meanwhile, far from being defeated on the streets, nationalists and fascists have maintained their footing.

This text picks up where our previous analysis left off, immediately after the massive confrontations of December 8, 2018.

The Aftermath of December 8, 2018

After two weeks of political instability, rioting, looting, rage, and confrontation, President Macron broke with his habit of withholding reaction by delivering an official speech on national television on Monday, December 10, 2018. Lots of yellow vesters were waiting to see if he would finally address their demands.

After reaffirming that his government was working with the parliament to find solutions, Macron presented his new measures. The government promised to increase minimum wage by €100 a month; cancel taxes on pensions for retired persons living on less than €2000 a month; ask employers to offer Christmas bonuses; offer tax exemption on overtime; and fight tax avoidance. However, Macron emphasized that he would not back down regarding the suppression of the wealth tax, one of the most outrageous elements of Macron's neoliberal agenda.

On December 11, Prime Minister Edouard Philippe presented the government's measures to the National Assembly. Finally, the government seemed to have a strategy with which to resolve the crisis.

That same night, someone opened fire on the crowd at the Christmas market in Strasbourg, killing 5 people and injuring 11 more. The "*plan vigipirate*"—an anti-terrorism security plan established in 1995 after several bombings in France—was raised to the level of "attack emergency."

With another day of action called for Saturday, December 15, 2018, these two events reshuffled the cards.

The government calls for reason, "non-violence," and dialogue

Following the attack in Strasbourg, the government decided not to forbid the yellow vest demonstrations of Saturday, December 15, 2018, as such decision would have only exacerbated widespread anger. Nevertheless, politicians called for "non-violence" and tried to dissuade protestors from taking part in the fifth nationwide day of action. Government spokesperson Benjamin Griveaux said that taking the streets on Saturday would be unreasonable in view of the situation in France following the attack. Some went further, saying that the time had come for the movement to end, while others demanded that "non-violent" protesters distance themselves from the more radical parts of the movement.

On Friday, December 14, 2018, in Brussels for a European summit, President Macron declared that France needed to return to normal, since he had addressed the yellow vest demands at the beginning of the week. "Dialogue is not established by occupying public space and through violence [...] I think that the sense of general interest will lead everyone to join a national debate, and to exchange with their mayor, in order to formulate political and sincere proposals." He concluded by calling French citizens to express themselves in the May 2019 European elections: "In no case should what happened the past weeks lead to calling into question the democratic election held eighteen months ago."

Paris on Lockdown

Nevertheless, some protestors were determined to take the streets, and some leftist organizations made calls to join the yellow vesters on Saturday, December 15. For the second week in a row, the government took exceptional law enforcement measures, deploying almost 100% of the police troops all over France—about 89,000 police officers, with 8000 in Paris alone.

The Paris prefect officially announced that for December 15, authorities would renew the law enforcement plan used the previous week with some improvements and modifications. As the previous week, a restricted area would be established near the *Champs Elysées* and around every

major government buildings, while in the meantime, other police forces would control and search all potential demonstrators and carry out preventive arrests.

The decision to re-use this strategy is significant for those who study police strategy, in that it seems to indicate that the authorities had concluded that all things considered, their strategy on December 8 had been effective, in contrast to the strategy they employed in Paris on November 24 and December 1.

Regarding the law enforcement units deployed in the streets of Paris, the prefect said that the authorities' plan would combine "heavy forces"—comprised of CRS and *gendarmes* (riot police)—as well as "mobile units" from various police forces including the Anti-Criminality Brigades (BAC), the Securing and Intervention Companies (CSI), the Territorial Brigades, and the Research and Intervention Brigades (BRI). These units would be mostly "kept for the end of the afternoon where violence attempts usually intensify."

The prefect continued to explain his plan: "last week, we managed well the yellow vest aspect, but we witnessed scenes of property destruction and pillage by some delinquents. Our objective will be to better control this phenomenon." Mounted police, canine units and 14 *gendarmerie* tanks would also be deployed in the French capital.

As the previous week, and following the recommendation of the Paris prefecture, numerous stores in "sensitive areas" boarded up their front windows and closed for Saturday, as did most museums and national monuments. For "safety reasons"—i.e., to facilitate police checkpoints—about 40 metro and RER closed starting at 5:30 am.

Once again, it seemed that the authorities had the upper hand on the situation well in advance. They were well prepared and well organized. As before, yellow vesters were supposed to gather near the *Champs Elysées*, the *Opéra*, and the *Saint Lazare* train station.

On the eve of the fifth act of the movement, everything remained uncertain: would the fear of state repression discourage protestors? Would some of us succeed in outmaneuvering the police the way we had the previous week? How would the events of the past week impact the mobilization? Some sources close to the Prime Minister's cabinet suggested that "moderate" demonstrators were already leaving the movement, and therefore, that the mobilization involve fewer people. The events of December 15 confirmed this forecast.

The Parisian Impasse

In Paris, the contrast with the previous week was undeniable. At 9 am, only a hundred demonstrators were actually present on the *Champs Elysées*, compared to several hundreds or thousands the previous weeks. In the end, it was easy for police to contain the crowd. That whole morning, the situation remained sterile on the Parisian avenue; protestors escaped from the kettle and ran for several meters, but were rapidly surrounded by police forces again. This war of attrition continued all day long.

Further away, near *Saint Lazare* and *Opéra*, the situation was similar. Those who attended the morning gatherings fell into the trap set by authorities; police surrounded them from the beginning. The only way to exit these kettles was to accept being searched and remove their yellow vests. Police took this opportunity to focus surveillance on individuals they considered potential threats. We have heard that some yellow vesters were also searching the bags of other protestors in order to evict potential "rioters" from the gathering.

At midday, the first actions and light confrontations took place. At the *Champs Elysées*, some demonstrators, tired of being surrounded by police forces, escaped the avenue via neighboring streets, forcing their way through a police cordon and initiating a wildcat demonstration. In *Opéra*, the “pressure cooker” strategy of the authorities bore fruit as the tension among protestors was increasing. As a result, the first tear gas canisters were shot at the crowd.

The rest of the day saw a succession of wildcat demonstrations and processions from a few hundred to several thousands strong walking through the streets of Paris. Some of these actions were more exciting than others, as police did not manage to follow all the crowds, but Paris did not witness the intensity of the previous weeks. Around 5 pm, after employing tear gas and stun grenades against a crowd of about 3000 individuals, police forces started clearing the *Champs Elysées* using their water canons. This offensive marked the end of the fifth act of the yellow vest movement in Paris. In total, 168 people were arrested and 115 put in custody.

On December 15, the far right was seen in the streets on several occasions. We haven’t learned whether anarchists or other rebels confronted them. Meanwhile, video footage spread widely showing police officers on motorcycles armed with LBD-40 launchers. These images remind us of 1986, when the infamous “*voltigeurs*”—police on motorcycles armed with batons—murdered a student named Malik Oussekiné, resulting in the dissolution of their department. Contacted about these images, the Paris prefecture explained that, for the fifth act of the movement, authorities dispatched about 50 new “*voltigeurs*” in Paris in order to rapidly intervene in case of trouble.

Reading reports from Paris, it was difficult not to feel frustrated or defeated. Compared to the previous weeks, the crowd was less numerous, less inspired, less creative, less offensive. The yellow vest movement had reached a plateau in Paris, if not an impasse.

Act V: Elsewhere around France

From the beginning of the movement, the authorities and corporate media outlets have focused chiefly on events in the streets of Paris, as if the situation in the French capital represented the yellow vest movement as a whole. But the movement differs dramatically from one city to the next. Rather than discussing “the” yellow vest movement in the singular, it would be more precise to speak of several yellow vest movements, each with its own tactics and goals, in different regions and points on the ideological spectrum.

In Dijon, many people gathered despite the attacks in Strasbourg. Among the crowd, one could hear conspiracy theories; some yellow vesters were willing to confront any “infiltrator” or potential “rioter.” Still, the crowd pursued its ritual march towards the local prefecture. When it arrived at the building, the police shot tear gas at the protestors. Part of the crowd decided to continue their demonstration, marching towards the biggest shopping center in the region, while others remained in the square to confront the police. Unfortunately, no concrete action emerged once the crowd reached the shopping center. In the end, six individuals were arrested and at least ten injured.

In Nantes, about 1200 yellow vesters took the streets. They marched towards the local prefecture but were pushed back by police. For several hours, police and protestors exchanged tear gas canisters and projectiles. In the end, 15 protestors were arrested and four people were injured.

In Marseille, yellow vesters, high school students, trade unionists, and members of a collective against insufficient housing marched together, totaling 2000 individuals. Police arrested 12 people; no damage took place.

In Toulouse, 4500 demonstrators took the streets. As the city had experienced riots during the previous weekend, the authorities requested the use of two tanks and two water canons to maintain order in the city. This equipment didn't prevent confrontations leading to 30 arrests and 10 injuries.

In Bordeaux, about 4500 people including yellow vesters, students, and trade unionists converged around the City Hall. The overall atmosphere was joyous despite the rain. When the crowd reached the *Pey Berland* square, they found City Hall protected from both sides by riot fences, police trucks, a water canon, and riot police cordons. After several minutes, the first projectiles were thrown at police forces, who answered with a rain of tear gas and grenades and even used the water canon to disperse the crowd. A drone was also spotted in the sky. Confrontations continued for several hours before the crowd left the square and took the *rue Sainte Catherine*, the city's chief shopping street, before being blocked by other police forces near the *Grand Theatre*. Later that night, some confrontations continued between demonstrators and police forces: at least one car was set on fire, as well as some makeshift barricades. However, the damage and rioting were less intense than the previous week. Altogether, 27 people were arrested and 22 injured.

In Lille, between 1500 and 2000 yellow vesters gathered—as much as the previous week—while in Montpellier, about 1500 yellow vesters met in the city center and informed passers-by about some of their demands, such as the Citizens' Initiative Referendum (RIC).

Even if actions took place in major cities and groups of yellow vesters blocked several important freeways like those connecting France to Spain as well as traffic circles and toll collection points, the total number of people who took part in the fifth nationwide day of action was approximately 66,000. In other words, half the number of active yellow vesters who participated in the previous nationwide day of action on December 8, 2018.

Obviously, we should take these figures with a grain of salt. They come from the government itself—and since December 15, 2018, corporate media and authorities have made a point of emphasizing the diminishing number of participants in hopes of accelerating the movement's downfall. As in almost every social movement, both sides—the state and the demonstrators—are stuck in a “war of figures,” as if only numbers determine the outcome of a struggle.

Nevertheless, by any measure, the movement had lost momentum everywhere except in a few cities. The effects of repression, the approach of Christmas holidays, and the concessions had all taken their toll; part of the movement was ready to quit the streets and move towards a more institutional path.

The Aftermath of December 15, 2018

Macron's government knew that they had won the battle of the fifth act. With Christmas approaching, they had finally succeeded containing the yellow rage of the preceding month. However, they were still walking on eggshells.

After the previous week's concessions, the government was trying to set up its "yellow vests" plan. On such a short notice, this plan presented a technical conundrum for the government, disrupting the original parliamentary calendar.

President Macron, understanding that the social and political situation was not yet entirely under control, canceled his official trip to Biarritz to prepare the forthcoming G7 in order to be present during the official meeting organizing the national consultation he had promised.

This national debate—due March 1—focuses on several subjects: the ecological transition, taxes, the organization of the state, democracy, and citizenship. It is important to mention that, having been removed from the national debate, the issue of immigration was reintroduced at the last minute on the insistence of some yellow vesters and politicians.

On Tuesday, December 17, after the official meeting, we learned that "the large national consultation" would take place in two phases. During the first one—lasting until mid-January—citizens are asked to speak with their mayors at a local level about the overall situation of the country. The mayors are to report these conversations to the government, so the latter can gain a broader understanding of the issues. Then, for full months, French citizens are invited to a national debate—the second phase of the plan—on the aforementioned issues.

Characteristically, the technocrats of the center suggested a technical solution to the problem of organic rage. As the saying goes, if people are angry, ask them to speak more about their anger. Speaking will take away the urgency to act.

The issue of the Citizens' Initiative Referendum (RIC) could also be added to this national discussion, as more and more yellow vesters and opposition politicians have demanded. Macron said he was open to dialogue about it. In the meantime, the authorities continued to evict road and traffic circle blockades.

Act VI: The Fight before Christmas

On the sixth nationwide day of action, the authorities counted 38,600 demonstrators around France. For the purposes of this report, we will focus on Paris, Toulouse, and Lyons to understand the events of December 22, 2018. These three specific examples illustrate the heterogeneous forms of the yellow vest movement as well as the different political frameworks that move its protagonists.

Paris

In Paris, yellow vesters decided to change their habits by gathering in Montmartre, near the *Sacré Coeur*, the outrageous religious building erected to thank God for the bloody suppression of the Paris Commune in 1871 and to expiate the city from the Communards' supposed sins. All week, some yellow vesters spread a fake call to gather in Versailles in order to mislead the authorities. This worked: a large number of police were deployed to chase ghosts in the wealthy neighboring city. As a result, several hundred yellow vesters were able to gather without difficulties in Montmartre instead.

During the day, thousands of yellow vesters marched in the streets of Paris in various wildcat demonstrations. Around 5:30 pm, a group of demonstrators reached the *Champs Élysées* and proceeded down the avenue. The protestors met a convoy of riot police and started attacking and chasing the police trucks. Several minutes later, motorcycle policemen—apparently trying

to help their colleagues—began throwing tear gas canisters in order to disperse the crowd. The confrontation rapidly escalated. As protestors closed in, attacking the police officers, one of them pulled out his gun and pointed it at the angry crowd. Far from fleeing, the demonstrators set upon the policemen with renewed anger and courage, forcing them to flee. The policeman who drew his gun is a fool; we are lucky he does not have several murders on his conscience today.

Unfortunately, some troubling behavior also took place on this day. That morning, assembling in front of *Louise Michel* square beside the *Sacré Coeur*, a group of yellow vesters shouted a supposedly “anti-system” chant. In addition to including extremely vulgar and homophobic lyrics that make light of rape, this chant is the work of a notorious anti-Semitic stand-up comedian. While singing, some protestors reproduced the infamous arm gesture of the same comedian—some type of upside-down fascist salute that supposedly indicates how far the system is actually deceiving us. In a video of this event, one yellow vester is clearly performing a fascist salute.

Later that night, a journalist reported that in the metro, around 11 pm, an elderly woman asked three drunk yellow vesters to stop doing the infamous “anti-system” arm gesture mentioned above. She said: “This is an anti-Semitic gesture. I am Jewish, my dad was deported to Auschwitz where he died.” In response, one yellow vester told her to “Get lost!” while another referenced the “*Révolution nationale*” (National Revolution), the official ideology of the Vichy regime—the Nazi collaborationist French government during World War II.

These events show a side of the yellow vest movement that some radicals and traditional leftist parties still prefer to ignore. The silence of those who do not address them is extremely dangerous. While advocates of the political center may seize upon events like these to discredit the movement, those who believe that the solution is to refuse to address them at all are ceding ground to the far right—which centrists will then use to present themselves as the only possible alternative. This is why we must always fight on both fronts.

Toulouse

The situation in Toulouse was very different. According to reports, the yellow vest movement remained strong and organized in this city and the surrounding region. The entire week before December 22, yellow vesters developed their actions, aiming to interrupt the economy as much as possible: they organized an illegal fireworks show entitled “yellow fever” in downtown Toulouse; they blocked several toll collection points and let drivers pass for free; they blocked the trucks arriving and leaving several large retail logistics centers; at the Airbus site of Colomiers, they blocked the supply of provisions to a restaurant belonging to the Elior group to support employees who have been sentenced to pay back the equivalent of two years of their salaries to the group.

Before the traditional Saturday gathering and demonstration, some people spoke in the general assemblies about their increasing frustration with the restriction of movement they experienced during the previous actions. Consequently, demonstrators organized several different marches for the sixth act. The authorities appear to have underestimated the possible impact of this new day of action, as the police were only blocking one street when the first march began.

The atmosphere was festive as the crowd headed towards the city center and its traditional Christmas market. After marching through the streets of downtown Toulouse for an hour without interference from law enforcement, the crowd of about 3000 reached the big boulevards. Facing this large and determined crowd, some riot police fled near *Jean Jaurès*. When the crowd

arrived at *François Verdier*, police began to shoot tear gas; this was a mistake, as demonstrators answered by shooting fireworks at them.

The plan to create several different marches succeeded, enabling the crowd to stay in control of the situation and dictate their own movements throughout the afternoon. Police were constantly running after groups of protestors in the downtown area to carry out arrests. Due to the general confusion and the fact that the demonstration took place the weekend before Christmas, police ended up using tear gas not only against demonstrators but also against shoppers and other passersby.

Later, the crowd converged at *Esquirol*. Because the demonstrators had succeeded in outmaneuvering the authorities, the collective atmosphere was not just festive but euphoric. No one wanted to leave the streets. The crowd decided to march towards the *Carmes* district—a wealthy district of Toulouse that never witnesses demonstrations. As the crowd proceeded through this bourgeois district, coffee shops and banks began closing their doors. The police were still far away; numerous targets were attacked, barricades were erected, and urban furniture caught fire.

In Toulouse, the yellow vest movement was far from losing momentum. On the contrary, the actions of December 22 brought new life to it in this part of France.

Lyons

The situation in Lyons has been difficult since the beginning of the yellow vest movement, as local fascists have successfully used the movement as a platform to spread their ideas and develop initiatives. On December 22, for the first time, people attempted to confront this growing fascist tendency.

For this sixth act, between 1000 and 2000 individuals took the streets. Everything started when several demonstrations organized that day converged to form a large march. Rapidly, the atmosphere among the crowd of protestors became tense as anti-fascists and railroad workers recognized dozens of well-known local fascists.

In the end, a large part of the demonstration began shouting “Lyons, Lyons, Antifa!” and “No demos for fascists, No fascists in our demos!” As a result, the group of fascists left the demonstration. Unfortunately, the same fascists managed to re-infiltrate the march from the rear.

At that moment, police forces were maintaining their distance except a helicopter monitoring the crowd from above. Around 4 pm, the official demonstration ended. Demonstrators were not ready to leave the streets and a more energetic wildcat demonstration followed.

By the time the participants reached the *Part Dieu*, a famous shopping district, the crowd had gained in numbers. However, police were determined to protect this temple of consumerism. In front of the official Tax building, police blocked the march and shot tear gas canisters at the crowd to push them back towards the city center. Yellow vesters changed their plan, heading towards the university district. Again, as soon as they approached their destination, police blocked their path and dispersed them.

At 6 pm, the cat and mouse game between protesters and police forces started in the *Guillotière* district. Law enforcement units became overwhelmed by the situation: they couldn’t tell the difference between potential threats and ordinary passersby. They began to shoot tear gas canisters everywhere at random, filling the entire district with a thick poisonous fog. However, the crowd succeeded in regrouping and intense confrontations broke out.

Some protestors blocked the entrance of a major retail store selling cultural and electronic products on the last weekend before Christmas. As a result, the store closed its doors for the day. Large numbers of police arrived and dispersed the crowd with tear gas, creating several stampedes in this high-traffic district.

Another cat and mouse game started around the *Bellecour* square. The crowd of protestors succeeded in outmaneuvering the authorities' plan. Indeed, police experienced considerable trouble arresting protestors. Consequently, they decided to carry out random searches in hopes of finding potentially incriminating evidence. Finally, despairing at the ineffectiveness of their strategy, police left the area.

The day of action in Lyons ended with police stopping a group of protestors near the Christmas market. At least two protestors were arrested.

Act VII: Keeping the Movement Alive into the New Year

Despite the Christmas holidays and the decreasing participation, some yellow vesters organized a seventh nationwide day of action on December 29. The hard core of the movement was determined to overcome the limits imposed by the calendar and find a fresh impetus for 2019.

Paris

In Paris, organizers kept the convergence point secret until the last moment in order to catch the authorities by surprise. That morning, about 60 yellow vesters went to the *Champs Elysées*. Unfortunately for them, police were already deployed all along the avenue, so nothing occurred.

Then some movement leaders announced the convergence point via social media. Yellow vesters were supposed to gather in front of major media outlets buildings—BFM, RMC, *Libération*, *L'Express*—located in the 15th district of the French capital near the Ministry of Defence. The point of this action was to denounce “unfair” media coverage of the movement. In the end, about 400 protestors answered the call.

The crowd began shouting slogans including “Journalists, collaborationists!” “BFM fake news” and “Macron out!” Some demonstrators asked for “free, independent, and objective media” while others tried to explain to police officers that corporate media outlets were the ones manipulating society. Some signs demanded the Citizens' Initiative Referendum (RIC). Throughout the rest of the day, the group of yellow vesters continued its tour of official media outlets, followed closely by police forces. In the end, most of the crowd dispersed near the Eiffel Tower or were surrounded by law enforcement units. Several confrontations also took place at the *Champs Elysées*.

Altogether, according to the official figures of the Prefecture, about 800 yellow vesters gathered in Paris, 57 were arrested, and 33 were put in custody.

Bordeaux

On December 29, Bordeaux drew the largest number of protestors in France, with a yellow wave several thousand strong—2400 according to authorities, more according to some journalists present.

In Bordeaux, 700 policemen were deployed as well as a helicopter. The authorities revised their strategies by closing the access to the entire *Pey Berland* square where the City Hall is located

and by trying to execute the “pressure cooker” strategy at several occasions—seeking to contain demonstrators in a closed area while increasing the pressure on them.

The demonstration started quietly, but as soon as the march passed law enforcement units near the *Gambetta* square, tension increased. Along a boulevard, the *cours Clémenceau*, the first trash bins were set on fire and projectiles were thrown at police who answered with tear gas canisters and rubber bullets. Some stores started closing their doors, while the first barricade appeared near the Christmas market. Shoppers were confined inside the market during the confrontations.

This is when the march split. About 50 demonstrators continued to confront police forces, while others marched towards the *Victoire* square. Some demonstrators started removing their yellow vests and leaving the demonstration. In the meantime, a large number of law enforcement units attempted to disperse groups of determined protestors who were defending themselves with numerous burning barricades. In the end, 25 individuals were arrested. Both yellow vesters and police officers attacked journalists and photographers in the streets of Bordeaux.

Rouen

In Rouen, about 1000 demonstrators took the streets. As usual, they gathered at 10 am in front of the City Hall. The situation remained quiet until midday, when the first barricades appeared. Almost instantly, police answered by firing tear gas canisters at the crowd. Protestors dispersed into the nearby streets and a cat and mouse game with police forces began.

A bit later, the front door of the *Banque de France*—the national Central Bank—was set on fire with trash bins, while some of its security cameras were smashed. Meanwhile, other barricades caught fire nearby and near the local law court. By the time police units and firemen arrived, the crowd was already near the City Hall.

Confrontations continued in the city center. Once again, police filled the streets with tear gas. Throughout the day, police experienced a war of nerves with demonstrators. They repeatedly had to clear numerous makeshift burning barricades from the streets in order to follow the crowd.

The protestors carried on until the end of the day; that evening, police continued to use tear gas and stun grenades to disperse them. At least 10 people were arrested and there were 10 injuries. One woman experienced a wound in her forehead and a fractured leg.

Elsewhere in France

In Lille, about 600 yellow vesters gathered for the last nationwide day of action of 2018. Six were arrested and three were injured after police repeatedly used tear gas to disperse the crowd.

In Metz, 300 demonstrators tried to break through a police cordon protecting the local prefecture, while in Marseille, a thousand yellow vestors gathered in front of the arch of triumph to show that the movement was not losing momentum.

In Toulouse, approximately 2500 people gathered under the slogan “Macron out!” and seven individuals were arrested, while in Amiens, 17 people were arrested on account of the local prefecture banning every street gathering and demonstration until January 2, 2019.

On New Year’s eve, several yellow vest groups also gathered in Paris and elsewhere in France—traffic circles included—for “festive and non-violent” demonstrations.

Gasping for Air

As the end of 2018 showed a loss of momentum, the die-hard elements of the movement struggled to keep it alive after the holidays.

Alongside about fifty other yellow vesters, Eric Drouet—an influential leader of the movement connected to the far right, who we have discussed in a previous article—organized a small gathering in Paris on Wednesday, January 2, 2019, to pay tribute to the ten people who died and the numerous protesters injured since the beginning of the movement. Their objective was “to shock public opinion.”

While the group was dressed in plain clothes—they decided not to wear their symbol for this action in order to avoid being clearly identified—several streets away from the Presidential palace, police stopped them and arrested Eric Drouet. This was covered by numerous media outlets.

Drouet and his followers expected this arrest. It was a perfect opportunity to capture public attention by portraying themselves as the victims of government repression. For yellow vesters, this illegitimate arrest was further proof that the government aimed to muzzle the movement and to discourage everyone from demonstrating without requesting authorization from the Prefecture.

This provoked a variety of reactions. The populist leader of the leftist *France Insoumise*, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who had already mentioned his fascination with Eric Drouet, requested his immediate release, stating that this arrest was an “abuse of power” and that “from now on, a political police force is targeting and harassing the important figures of the yellow vest movement.”

The far right also voiced support for Eric Drouet. Florian Philippot, leader of the political party *Les Patriotes* and former ally of Marine Le Pen (*Rassemblement National*), who expressed his concern that “the Macron political regime was becoming more and more authoritarian.” The President of the *Rassemblement National* in the Paris region, Wallerand de Saint-Just also expressed support. Eric Drouet reposted Wallerand de Saint-Just’s messages of support on his personal twitter, confirming his own sympathy for nationalist ideas.

Act VIII: January 5, 2019

On the eve of the eighth nationwide day of action, the authorities explained that they expected a higher participation in the rest of France than in Paris. For the first time since November 17, 2018—when the movement got underway—the Parisian Prefecture received requests from yellow vest groups to demonstrate in the capital. As a result, two different marches were organized for January 5: one between the *Panthéon* and the district of *Saint-Germain-des-Près*, and one between the City Hall and the National Assembly.

Government spokesperson Benjamin Griveaux castigated yellow vesters who decided to continue the mobilization despite the President’s concessions. According to him, the movement had “been coopted by agitators who want an insurrection and to overthrow the government.” Earlier this week, the Minister of the Interior Christophe Castaner asked the prefects of each region to proceed with the “complete and definitive eviction” of the hundred blockades and meeting points held by members of the yellow vest movement. To do so, the Minister allowed the prefects to use any legal means—financial fees, use of police forces, and so on.

Finally, in addition to the traditional Saturday demonstrations and actions, a women’s yellow vest group decided to create their own event in Paris, for Sunday, December 6, 2019. Organizers

specified that this action was “not a feminist struggle but a feminine one,” a statement that speaks for itself.

Paris

In Paris, the day opened with the traditional gathering at the *Champs Elysées*. There, the group of yellow vesters improvised a general assembly near the *Arc de Triomphe*. Then, as the group gained in numbers, they walked down the avenue towards the *Concorde* square before police stopped them. The crowd of 1500 headed towards the *Saint Lazare* district. On their way to the train station, the yellow vesters stopped by *Place de la Bourse* to boo the international news agency *Agence France-Presse* (AFP).

In the *Saint Lazare* area, the march continued towards the city center, despite the heavy police presence in the area. However, near the *Hotel de Ville*—the departure point of the permitted afternoon demonstration—police forces blocked the protesters. In front of the main City Hall, there were already 4000 yellow vesters. As usual, several banners and signs asking for the implementation of the RIC were spotted. Rapidly, the crowd moved towards *Châtelet* shouting “Macron out!” before immediately being pushed back by tear gas. After some confusion, the procession changed direction towards its authorized destination: the National Assembly.

The first real confrontations took place near the riverbank when protesters attacked police with glass bottles and stones. Then, on the Léopold Sedar Senghor footbridge, tense confrontations took place. As people attempted to cross the Seine River in order to reach the National Assembly located on the other side, police blocked the access to the bridge and employed tear gas. Note that, during the clashes on the bridge, Christophe Dettinger, a demonstrator and ex-boxer, took on the line of fully armored police with his bare hands and succeeded in pushing them back. Little by little, the law enforcement pressure around the demonstration increased. A boat was set on fire during the confrontations on the footbridge. According to radical sources present on site, the yellow crowd comprised approximately 10,000 individuals.

Near the *Assemblée Nationale*, police forces had blocked all access routes to the official building. As a result, the march couldn’t go any further and confrontations broke out. Being tear gassed at a dead end, many protestors decided to start wildcat demonstrations through the neighboring streets of the Latin district. There the first barricades were erected and set on fire—especially on the *Saint-Germain* boulevard. The crowd expressed its rage: every piece of urban furniture, self-service scooter, or motorcycle was smashed, lit on fire, or used as a barricade.

Wildcat demonstrations and confrontations continued in different parts of the city until later that day: in the Latin district, near *Saint Lazare*, at the *Champs Elysées*. In the end, government spokesperson Benjamin Griveaux had to be evacuated in emergency as a group of yellow vesters succeeded in entering his government ministry building. They used a small construction vehicle to knock down the front door, then entered the property and smashed up two cars.

At least 24 people were arrested that day. Friends present in the streets report a significant presence of fascists and nationalists of all kinds.

Elsewhere in France

For a movement supposedly in decline, a remarkable number of actions and demonstrations took place in France on the eighth day of action. Altogether, at least 50,000 people participated. The number of people involved in street actions almost doubled compared to the previous week.

In Bordeaux, about 4600 people demonstrated. The city remains one of the bastions of the movement. After a quiet beginning, the crowd changed course, entering *Sainte-Catherine* street and heading towards the *Pey Berland* square and the City Hall. As soon as the crowd arrived at the square, the first confrontations began. Police answered with tear gas and water canons, while in the nearby streets, demonstrators broke up concrete and cobblestones to use as projectiles. As night fell, the first barricades were erected and several cars were set on fire. Police forces charged the rioters repeatedly, but they were determined to continue. In the end, 11 people were arrested.

In Beauvais, yellow vesters converged at the local airport in the morning; however, no action took place, as police blocked their way. That afternoon, police dispersed a group of 600 people who were trying to enter the city center.

In Lyons, after a traditional march through the city, several thousand yellow vesters blocked the A7 freeway both ways, creating traffic jams.

In Nantes, about 2000 individuals took the streets. As soon as the afternoon demonstration started, confrontations with police broke out. During the clashes, some yellow vesters set fire to a pile of Christmas trees in front of the Cathedral. All afternoon, police forces shot tear gas canisters and concussion grenades at the crowd. At least one person was injured.

In Rouen, between 1700 and 4000 yellow vesters demonstrated. Around noon, protestors threw cobblestones and other projectiles at police, who answered with tear gas canisters and rubber bullets. According to authorities, police were confronted with 400 determined rioters. In the end, several people were injured, 19 were arrested, and 18 put in custody.

In Caen, confrontations began in the afternoon when demonstrators who wanted to occupy the *Résistance* square started building barricades with the fences of a nearby construction site. They also lit fires on the square and threw projectiles at law enforcement units who answered with tear gas.

Other gatherings and demonstrations took place in Toulouse; Saint-Nazaire, where yellow vesters blocked the main bridge during several hours before being dispersed by police forces; Sedan, where protestors blocked the railway for several hours; Dijon, where a group of yellow vesters attacked a *gendarmerie* barracks; Saint-Malo, where yellow vesters blocked the ferry terminal; Avignon; Marseille; Quimper; near Nancy; near Nimes, where yellow vesters dumped hundreds of liters of waste oil on the roads; and near Sevrey, where demonstrators were arrested for attempting to block an Amazon logistics platform.

In view of all these actions, it is possible that this first day of action of 2019 shows that the movement has survived the holidays and will continue to be a force this year. But what kind of force? This is the important question.

We will address it in the next installment of this series.

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A Chronicle from December 8, 2018 to January 5, 2019
January 9, 2019

Retrieved on 17th June 2021 from crimethinc.com

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