

# **The Yellow Vest Movement: Showdown with the State**

**Reports from the Clashes in Paris, around France, and across Europe**

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Since November, France has been shaken by the yellow vest movement, a grassroots reaction to President Macron's proposal to increase fuel taxes in order to force the poor to pay for the transition to "ecological" technologies. Like the Occupy movement, the yellow vest movement cohered around shared tactics and frustration rather than common goals or values; consequently, the movement has been a battleground for many different political agendas and factions. The far right initially took advantage of the movement's "apolitical" character to gain influence, especially online; but as the movement spread and the clashes with the police intensified, anarchists and other uncontrollable rebels also staked out ground within the movement.

Although divided as to how to relate to the movement, anarchists and other autonomous rebels chose to get involved in order to confront fascist and authoritarian tendencies from within, undermine the legitimacy of the authorities, and reorient the movement towards more systemic solutions. These efforts bore fruit: fascists have been driven out of demonstrations; anti-capitalist and anti-fascist blocs have marched together in Paris; new connections have arisen between anarchists, autonomists, and other yellow vesters, not to mention rail workers, students, and those who live on the margins of the metropolis; demonstrators have attacked manifestations of capitalism and the state with increasing frequency; slogans from the protests against the *Loi Travail* and other radical movements have spread among the protesters. Yet the outcome of the yellow vest movement might still benefit any number of different groups, including the far right.

Macron's government has repeatedly attempted to establish dialogue with the spokespersons of the yellow vests. All these attempts have failed. The majority of the movement has refused any negotiation with officials and seems to reject the political system as a whole—this is why it has been successful in compelling Macron to promise concessions. At the same time, leftist populists and far-right nationalists are poised to cash in on the crisis it has created.

The tension is still mounting in France. For two weeks now, students have been blockading schools and universities to protest against education reforms; meanwhile, trade unions joined the yellow vest movement last weekend, as did other economic sectors. The government is desperately seeking a way to resolve the situation as the Christmas holidays approach. Hoping to avoid a fifth act in the conflict, on December 10, President Macron promised to grant many of the protesters' demands. Yet the story isn't over. Another day of action has been called for Saturday, December 15.

There have been copycat actions on three continents now, though it does not appear that the yellow vest movement is about to spread worldwide. France has been somewhat out of step with the rhythms of the rest of the world—a wave of riots broke out in France in 2005, years ahead of the Greek insurrection of 2008, but nothing like the Occupy movement occurred there until *Nuit Debout* in 2016. Still, the yellow vest movement may offer some hints as to what the next global wave of protest will look like. If what is happening in France is any indication, we can anticipate a new round of uprisings catalyzed by economic desperation, involving a wide range of participants and ideologies—who clash with each other just as fiercely as with the authorities.

In order to explore these issues in greater detail, we present the following update from France. The work of many hands, this report picks up where our previous analysis left off, in the aftermath of the chaotic and insurrectionary nationwide day of action on December 1.

## The Aftermath of December 1

The confrontations that took place in Paris and elsewhere around the country on December 1 were arguably the most significant rioting in France since 1968. The intensity caught the government off guard. President Macron rushed back from the G20 summit in Argentina to assess the damage and try to reassert order.

Hoping to neutralize the movement, Macron promised to grant some of the movement's demands. This didn't placate the majority of protesters, who reaffirmed their determination to demonstrate on Saturday, December 8.

Within the yellow vest movement, opinions differed about this new day of action. The images of chaos from the previous weekend were still in everybody's minds; pacifists and legalists argued fiercely with the more radical yellow vesters. Organizers debated different strategies. Some wanted to march towards the presidential palace; some suggested blocking the *périphérique* (the Parisian beltway); some proposed that people should gather in front of the *Maison de la Radio* (the major radio station building) in order to occupy it and seize control of the airwaves; others argued against going to Paris, seeing it as a trap set by authorities, in favor of developing local initiatives instead. As December 8 approached, it was impossible to tell how it would play out.

On Tuesday, December 4, the first trials took place for charges arising from the yellow vest demonstrations of Saturday, December 1. Three people were tried on charges included participation "in a gathering, even if temporarily formed, with the objective—characterized by one of several material facts—of preparing and committing wilful violence against persons or destructions or property damages" and "intentional violence on a PDAP" (Person in Charge of Public Authority). The first individual received a €200-fine suspended sentence for violence; the second was sentenced to three months in prison and held in detention; the third was sentenced to a year in prison. This also set the stakes for December 8.

On another front, the student strike against school reforms intensified. All week, students blocked their high schools and universities, held general assemblies, built barricades, demonstrated in the streets, and confronted police. Not wishing to fight on multiple fronts at once, the government responded aggressively, with police injuring numerous students. The violent attacks on high school students—usually barely mentioned in corporate media—gained wide exposure with a viral video posted on Thursday, December 6 showing the conditions in which students were arrested at Mantes-la-Jolie. Dozens of students are lined up on their knees with their hands on their heads, some of them facing the wall, surrounded by riot police officers. The person shooting the video remarks, "Here is a quiet and well-behaved class!"

The propagation of these images couldn't have come at a worse time for the French government. On the eve of the fourth act of the yellow vest movement, the video intensified the general climate of rage and defiance towards the police and government.

## Paris under Siege

Fearing that scenes of chaos and "extreme violence" would recur in Paris on December 8, the authorities took drastic preventive measures. For the weekend, Paris would be in a state of siege.

Eighteen museums and eight national monuments remained closed for the day, including the Eiffel tower and Notre Dame Cathedral. Both Parisian Operas cancelled their performances, as did

other theaters. The Paris prefecture asked the storekeepers of the Champs Elysées, the Matignon, the Montaigne, and the Franklin-Roosevelt avenues to close their stores and board up their windows. The major fancy department store groups Galeries Lafayette and Printemps decided to close all their stores located near the Champs Elysées, the Opera, Montparnasse, or Nation.

From 6 am until the end of the demonstrations, a traffic restriction plan would be enforced in order to facilitate the movements of law enforcement. In addition, 36 metro and RER stations would be closed starting 5:30 am in order to facilitate police controls. The restriction affected about 56 bus lines. Several sports events and television shows were also cancelled, postponed, or relocated.

## The Government Adjusts Its Strategy

After the previous week's fiasco, President Macron instructed Minister of the Interior Christophe Castaner to review his law enforcement strategy in preparation for the fourth act of the yellow vest movement. According to the Minister of the Interior, "the last three weeks have given birth to a monster that has escaped its genitors."

For December 8, the authorities took exceptional measures. Fully 89,000 police officers were to be deployed all over France—almost 100% of the troops—with 8000 in Paris alone. In addition, the state requisitioned 12 gendarmerie tanks, the same ones that participated in the eviction of the ZAD last April and May. Mobile water cannons and helicopters were also deployed in Paris.

In contrast with the previous week, the police did not remain static, defending large restricted areas. This time, the only restricted area was designated around the Champs Elysées and the major government buildings. There, police forces were tasked with searching and controlling every single person who sought to enter the avenue.

Having been criticized for failing to keep up with events on December 1, police received orders to stick close to protestors, initiate frontal confrontations, and carry out arrests at any opportunity. As the traditional riot police forces (CRS and *gendarmes*) move slowly on account of their heavy equipment, these tasks were given to the BAC (Anti-Criminality Brigades), the CSI (Securing and Intervention Companies), and other police units.

The authorities also set up roadblocks around Paris in order to control vehicles entering the capital city. Several prefectures temporally banned the sale and transport of fuel, pyrotechnical materials, and flammable products in order to prevent people from constructing homemade incendiary devices.

In the days leading up to the demonstration, the government ramped up psychological pressure by making several appeals for "non-violence" and demanding that "reasonable yellow vesters, those who do not support violent action, dissociate themselves from extremists and not gather in Paris," hoping to isolate the most determined parts of the movement. At the same time, with the assistance of media outlets, the authorities tried to spread fear among the population by asking everyone to stay home on Saturday, sending clear warnings to anyone who might join one of the Parisian demonstrations.

The trap was set for Paris. Still, the authorities were expecting only several thousand people in Paris, including some "ultra-violent" individuals.

Several hours before the demonstrations, an important official and confidential document leaked. The entire law enforcement plan of the Paris prefecture was available online. This docu-

ment made it easier to understand what to expect in the streets for the following day: 85 police teams were mobilized to control and search individuals in train and metro stations; mounted police were to be present in the streets again; and so on. The authorities have since opened an investigation to find the origin of the leak.

On the eve of the fourth act of the yellow vest movement, some comrades published an article on “the rupture in progress,” arguing:

“We can’t be sure that this Saturday, the plan decided by the Interior Minister will not be more insidious, avoiding frontal conflicts in favor of targeted arrests—in the German manner, as it were—in order to contain the tension to the point of breathlessness.”

The events of December 8 confirmed this forecast.

## Staying outside the Trap

It would be impossible to detail all the events that took place in the streets of Paris. Here, we draw on narratives from several anarchists and autonomous rebels, complemented by information from corporate media and other sources.

### Report #1

*This first report was jointly composed by several individuals covering different zones of activity.*

Early in the morning, groups gathered in various areas of Paris: at *Place de l’Etoile*, *Bastille*, *Porte Maillot*, and *République*. Corporate media outlets were already broadcasting their litanies: the situation was under control, authorities were already arresting dangerous individuals, the number of arrests was increasing minute by minute. At 10:30 am, the authorities announced that they had already arrested 354 individuals, keeping 127 in custody. Soon, they launched the first tear gas canisters at the *Champs Elysées*, where about 1500 people had already assembled. By 11 am, the gathering near the Saint-Lazare train station was blocked and surrounded by CRS (riot police). For this reason, we decided not to enter the police perimeter, so that we might stay in control of the situation.

At 11:30 am, near the Opera, we met a group of about 1000 people. The whole district was blocked by police forces and checkpoints. You could easily enter the perimeter, but to exit it you would have to comply by presenting an ID and letting them search your bag. Police forces had a “wanted list” in their possession in order to arrest potential troublemakers. Two tanks were spotted near the Haussmann Boulevard. Because the police seemed to be in control of the situation in this district, we decided to move towards the *Champs Elysées*. Several police troops were already deployed near *Avenue de Friedland*—to protect access to the *Place de la Concorde*—and *Saint-Augustin* square. That morning, we were a sparse crowd of several thousand individuals walking through a dead city, with about 90% of the windows around us boarded up.

At 11:30 am, near the *Champs Elysées*, thousands of people were converging to enter the avenue. Up to that point, every single demonstrator had been meticulously searched by members of the BAC (the Anti-Criminality Brigade) before entering the demonstration zone. But the gentle pressure created by the arrival of waves of demonstrators trying to enter the *Champs Elysées*

eventually enabled people to break through one of the checkpoints and people succeeded in entering without being searched. When we entered the avenue, there were already a lot of people there.

Radical far-right groups were also present. The atmosphere was quite surreal with the entire avenue barricaded and protected. Ridiculous groups of BAC members could be seen at regular intervals on the sidewalks wearing ski masks and swimming goggles and carrying LBD-40 weapons. Further away, near the *Place de l'Etoile*, police forces launched a charge involving a lot of grenades in order to contain the crowd within the designated perimeter, out of reach of the *Arc de Triomphe* that had been ravaged the previous week. Once again, the outcome of the situation at the *Champs Elysées* was a forgone conclusion. We decided to leave and entered the *Saint-Philippe du Roule* district. There, a lot of yellow-vested groups were trying to figure out where interesting events were happening, just as we were. Little by little, the crowd gathered near Haussmann Boulevard and *Avenue de Friedland*.

From 12:30 pm until 2:30 pm, while police lines were still blocking access to the *Arc de Triomphe*, the first serious confrontations started. As soon as we arrived on site, we saw a man shot in the thigh with a rubber bullet. We provided first aid, then wished him good luck and continued our way. For more than an hour, several thousand individuals confronted CRS forces, consecutively resisting charges and tear gas. Some comrades drove out members of *Action Française*, a monarchist and far-right group, then chanted “Paris, Paris, Antifa!” The confrontations on *Avenue de Friedland* continued and the first burning barricades appeared. The police charges were unusually violent; we couldn't count the number of tear gas canisters and flash-bang grenades they used during the confrontations. Several stores and a bank were attacked, but surprisingly, the nearby Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Paris remained almost intact, despite part of the demonstration remaining static in front of the building for some time.

As we were losing ground, the crowd decided to leave this point and marched towards the *Saint-Augustin* area. There, a Mercedes was set on fire; people erected barricades using the wooden planks that protected stores' front windows and set them on fire; a luxurious handbag store was looted. As property destruction intensified, police forces tried to surround protestors with three tanks at the intersection between *Avenue de Friedland* and Courcelles Street. They employed copious amounts of tear gas, but the majority of demonstrators succeeded in exiting the trap. Then the crowd split; some went towards Monceau Park, where a diplomatic car was set on fire, while others departed for Haussmann boulevard, where people erected massive barricades and welcomed police trucks with rains of projectiles.

Around 3 pm, as the police presence was increasing in the area—police tanks and trucks were going towards *Avenue de Friedland* and several BAC groups were patrolling the streets—several groups of protestors agreed to leave the zone. About 2000 individuals took Capucines Boulevard, with more demonstrators joining in the course of their advance. Tired of trying to get closer to the *Champs Elysées*, several groups decided to move towards the Climate March that was supposed to leave the *Place de la Nation* at 2 pm in order to reach *République*.

The situation in Paris was no longer a regular demonstration. There were too many people everywhere in the streets; all the stores were closed on most shopping avenues. This was significant on a Saturday before Christmas.

Around 4 pm, groups of yellow vesters were arriving at the *République* square. *Gendarmes* and CRS were already present in every major street surrounding the square. Their strategy brought back memories of the *Loi Travail* and *Nuit Debout* protests in 2016. The Climate March had already

arrived, and the atmosphere was mostly festive. Everyone agreed that the demands of the yellow vest and environmental movements were not opposed, and that the divide-and-conquer strategy of the authorities and media would not work. The crowd was heterogeneous but far from being offensive. Therefore, we decided to leave the square, only to discover that individuals wearing yellow vests were not allowed to do so. The atmosphere grew tense, but no one was ready to charge police lines yet.

Further away, in the *Saint-Lazare* district, while police backups were becoming more visible, a march several thousand strong took the large boulevards connecting *Opéra* to *République*. Property destruction became automatic and looting frequent. Every window of every fashion store, bank, fast-food restaurant, and similar target was attacked. Several tags also appeared on the walls; the atmosphere in the march was clearly anti-capitalist. The march stopped near *Strasbourg Saint-Denis* in order to build a large barricade blocking the entire width of the boulevard. The latter was set on fire and more demonstrators joined the festivities.

Around 5 pm, some of us decided to go back to Haussmann Boulevard to see what was going on there, but then we heard that a wildcat demonstration was taking place near *Grands Boulevards*. Part of it took the direction of *Châtelet-Les Halles* (in the center of Paris) via the street *Saint-Denis*. Participants sang the International—a nice change from the *Marseillaise* (the French national anthem). A large part of the crowd chanted “*Paris, debout, soulève-toi!*” (“Paris, stand up, rise up!”) while the windows of banks continued to fall to the cheers of some demonstrators. At some point, a group of police officers arrived, creating a moment of panic within the procession. Barricades were set on fire in the nearby streets, while protestors threw stones at a police car in the street *Quincampoix*. The march tried several times to reach the City Hall of Paris, but without success, as police were blocking the streets. Finally, the crowd left the area by taking the small streets of the *Marais* district in order to reach the square *République*.

Around 7 pm, we arrived at *République* under a rain of tear gas canisters. The sport outlet store located near the square was attacked, but a police charge ended any hope of looting it. Then, a group left the square and started another wildcat demonstration. As soon as the procession took the street *Faubourg du Temple*, two police cars passing by were targeted with projectiles. A McDonald’s was also attacked. Further away, some barricades were built and trash bins set on fire. Near the Goncourt metro station, a huge flaming barricade paralyzed traffic and thick black smoke filled the streets. Little by little, the crowd dispersed.

Again, today was a great day!

## Report #2

*This is a compressed summary of another personal account.*

The author presents a different analysis of the events of December 8. Due to the deployment of police in the Parisian streets and the massive wave of arrests that started earlier in the morning, the author experienced the first part of the day as confusing and something of a failure. The psychological warfare carried out by the government seemed to have succeeded, as several demonstrators who gathered at Saint-Lazare felt helpless and anxious before the powerful display of police forces—checkpoints, tanks, water cannons and trucks everywhere.

Moreover, it seemed to the author that the majority of the people present for the morning demonstration were inexperienced and didn’t know how to proceed. In the end, the demonstra-



tion didn't happen, and people felt confused, defeated, and, for the most part, wandered around the streets of Paris seeking some sort of action that would finally bring some air within the oppressive trap of law enforcement.

Then, around 1 pm, the author explains that the situation changed. Indeed, most police forces had emptied out of the streets in the area—probably to deal with other groups of demonstrators closer to the *Champs Elysées*. Protestors seized this opportunity to initiate a wildcat demonstration, but unfortunately without any clear objectives as to where to go and what to do. The march seemed really unorganized; at some point, it was attacked by police with grenades before people decided to take another direction.

Near the *Madeleine* square, the crowd met some yellow vesters and rail workers who were coming from the *Champs Elysées*. The overall situation there was really difficult. In addition to the fierce and violent police repression, demonstrators had to deal with personal trauma and fatigue. Some yellow vesters said that they were exhausted and were hoping that others would take the helm.

Around 3 pm, people converged at the *Saint-Augustin* square. There, the crowd seemed much younger—probably including some high school students—and more determined. As more and more protestors assembled around the square, police shot the first tear gas canisters to disperse the crowd. Confrontations and property destruction continued until no one could bear the gas anymore.

Little by little, hours of humiliation and frustration, as well as consecutive police charges, generated an uncontrollable raging crowd. This angry mass started by destroying a Starbucks coffee shop. Then, the crowd split into several processions after a violent police charge. One procession took the direction of *Châtelet* and the City Hall. Everywhere, capitalist symbols were attacked and stores were looted. At this moment, it seemed that “everyone wanted to smash everything, the only thing that was preventing all of us from doing so was fear.”

Around 7 pm at *République*, as nobody seemed to want to leave the square, the first sporadic confrontations took place. Soon, police forces filled the entire square with tear gas and the crowd dispersed. Later on, around 11 pm, when the square was empty and calm had returned, small groups of militia-like policemen were patrolling the zone with ski masks and guns for firing rubber bullets at the ready.

### **Report #3**

*Some friends who were also present in the streets of Paris, contributed this short report on the events of December 8.*

On Friday, December 7, the city of Paris was readying itself for the day of action called by the yellow vester movement for the next day. Undeniably, the riots and scenes of chaos of the previous week had left scars. From *Opéra* to *République*, all major stores and banks were covering their front windows with wooden planks. Would these precautions be enough to prevent damage?

On Saturday, December 8, we intended to go to the *Saint-Lazare* gathering at 10 am in order to evaluate the situation outside of the *Champs Elysées*. However, due to the deployment of police around the city and the news of the morning arrests, we decided to rethink our plans. In our opinion, there was no more point joining the morning gathering, especially when we knew that

in order to do so we would have to be searched at the perimeter and then would probably end up being surrounded by police.

Afterwards, while we were discussing strategies and possible impasses and futures for the yellow vest movement, we received the news that some friends had been able to pass through police checkpoints without any complications. In the end, we decided to meet them later.

First, we decided to join the Climate March in order to see what was going on there. We were really surprised to see so many people in the streets—25,000 according to the organizers, 17,000 according to authorities. Among the numerous organizations, it is worth mentioning that an anti-capitalist and radical contingent headed the march, and some yellow vesters were also present among the crowd. The latter were thanked several times for being there. However, we decided to leave on account of the explicitly pacifist and reformist messaging of the march.

At *République*, the square was already occupied by several hundred individuals, the majority wearing yellow vests. The atmosphere was light and relaxed. However, police forces were already present in the nearby streets, *rue du Faubourg du Temple* and *rue du Temple*. In *rue du Temple*, after we passed about 15 police trucks, we saw members of the BAC already equipped with ski masks and LBD-40 launchers, calmly talking, joking, and smoking cigarettes with other police officers who were wearing yellow vests. It was obvious that police wanted to infiltrate the yellow vest movement in order to monitor, attack, and arrest protestors from within.

As we continued walking towards downtown Paris, we saw numerous traces of the morning's confrontations—smashed windows, graffiti, and abandoned barricades. Afterwards, wandering around *Châtelet*, where groups of yellow vesters were converging, we heard the familiar noise of an unruly demonstration approaching. Suddenly, the crowd ran towards us before heading towards *Beaubourg*. We understood that something had scared the crowd. Nevertheless, we decided to continue walking in the direction that the crowd had just come from.

All around us, the atmosphere was strange. Some people who were not involved in the day of actions were quietly drinking in fancy cafés or restaurants, while others were finishing their Saturday shopping—all this in the middle of empty streets, smashed windows, and barricades. It was as if two different atmospheres coincided. Even more surprising, there was absolutely no sign of police in the district.

Then, near the street *Réaumur*, we encountered a march of several hundred comrades shouting anti-capitalist chants. Unfortunately for them, the storm had already ravaged the entire street before them. We stayed there a couple of minutes contemplating the last flames of a barricade before continuing our night walk towards the *Grands Boulevards*.

Earlier in the day, some of us had decided to take a look at what was going on near the *Opéra*. Once in the area, we were surprised to see that no cars were parked in the streets and there was almost no one driving in this luxurious district. It seemed that, like us, many people were trying to figure out where the chaos was happening. To find it, we simply followed the police helicopter that had been patrolling over Paris since the morning.

After circumventing two police roadblocks, we saw one of the large demonstrations in the *Saint-Augustin* square. People were passing in waves; we couldn't tell what was going on. Considering the overall situation of the day—massive waves of arrests and a large number of police—we located possible escape routes in case of a police charge or crowd stampede. At some point, police tear-gassed the crowd, provoking a moment of panic. We decided to escape via one of the nearby streets, and had to sprint in order to avoid a CRS line that was trying to block us from

the rear. In the end, due to the number of people who were slowly arriving, the police ended up stepping back.

We took this opportunity to move towards *Saint-Lazare*, taking advantage of having the whole streets—the whole city?—to ourselves, not knowing what we might encounter around the next corner. At some point, police motorcycles and an unmarked white truck passed in front of us at full speed, then returned coming the other direction several minutes later. Even now, we don't know what this truck was for: delivering more ammunition to conflict points? Extracting people arrested from confrontation zones to bring them to police stations?

Once we arrived in front of the *Saint-Lazare* train station, we didn't know where to go. Demonstrators were everywhere in the area, and police were throwing tear gas canisters in front of the station to disperse the crowd. We decided to go back towards *Opéra*. Then we joined a large march that began to erect barricades out of urban furniture including barriers and wooden planks. Part of the crowd also started smashing everything and looting stores. Everything was happening really fast.

The rioting crowd took the large boulevards between *Opéra* and *République*. Police attacked the rear of the crowd with tear gas, yet without any real success, as people were running through the large arteries for several minutes. From the left side of the street to the right side, people smashed numerous windows—sometimes without paying attention to their surroundings, sometimes even without wearing a mask.

The procession continued its course towards *Strasbourg Saint-Denis*. At this point, the procession was clearly outside the perimeter established by law enforcement, as the crowd was running among cars. Some stores were open—which did not protect them from being looted or having their windows smashed. Upon reaching *Strasbourg Saint-Denis*, the crowd slowed down and some of us took this opportunity to leave.

When some of us reached the *Grands Boulevards* later, once again the atmosphere was really strange. The entire boulevard was full of barricades and covered with all kinds of debris. The area was really quiet despite the large number of people in the streets. Tourists, yellow vests, and protestors of all kind were immortalizing the moment with their phones. A friendly and joyful atmosphere reigned in the boulevard, while further away, towards the *Opéra*, police lights and clouds blocked the view.

We decided to walk towards *Place de la République* to see if something was happening there—since we had left the Climate March hours ago. Passing through the streets, we admired the consequences of the raging storm that had passed. Some cars were trying to find their ways through the numerous barricades; the front of a fast-food restaurant was smashed; bus shelters were destroyed; anarchist and anti-capitalist tags gave color to the walls.

When we finally reached the *République* square, several thousands of people were already occupying it; a large banner saying “ZAD partout!” (“ZAD everywhere!”) was wrapped around the massive statue. So far, the atmosphere seemed joyful; we decided to wait there to see whether the situation would escalate. Police were already on site; as usual, they were ready to block every single exit around the square if necessary. After several minutes, the crowd got bigger and started to get closer to the police lines in front of the *rue du Temple*. The first torches were lit and the crowd of demonstrators started encouraging each other and booing the forces of authority. Several projectiles were thrown at the police. Immediately, the first tear gas canisters were shot into the middle of the square, where some demonstrators began to panic.

The rain of tear gas canisters continued for a while, and little by little people left the square. Some started a wildcat demonstration, while others simply passed behind the police lines. Once again, the atmosphere was surreal. Several steps away from the *Place de la République*, people were eating at restaurants and drinking with friends at bars, like they would on any other Saturday night, not feeling disturbed at all by the surrounding chaos, the police, the tear gas, or the helicopter lighting up the square. More proof that although we all supposedly live under the same system, we share different realities and worlds.

Later that night, we decided to pass by the *République* square one more time to see if something was still happening there. When we arrived, the square was almost empty and occupied by BAC officers and other agents in ski masks wielding LBD-40 launchers. Some of them attacked the few people left on the square with stun grenades and rubber bullets. We ended our long day witnessing these scenes of police violence.

## Report #4

Around 9 am, as the prefecture of Paris had shut down several metro stations for safety measures, we exited the metro seven or eight stations from our destination: the *Place de l'Etoile*. There, the most striking thing was the strange—and somehow oppressive—silence in the streets that was regularly interrupted by police sirens. All the shop windows had been boarded up overnight, and after walking only 500 meters we saw the first police cordons checking people and searching bags. One person in front of us was brutally pressed against a wall after protesting when the police confiscated his swimming goggles. We passed through the checkpoint without a hitch, even if having gloves in our possession made the police officers suspicious. Police officers demanded that we open our jackets and vigorously patted us down.

Beside us, we saw one person leave a group of demonstrators and make a common gesture of disapproval at a group of *gendarmes*. Five of them left their ranks to charge at him and slammed him down on the ground. Brave acts of self-expression are admirable, but in that situation, considering the context and the tangible tension among police officers, his behaviour was borderline suicidal.

The police were indeed on edge. As we approached the meeting point, the situation became increasingly absurd. We were checked and searched every 50 meters. At every checkpoint, our thoughts were with those who were arrested for carrying harmless item with them. If any of us had tried to speak to them, we would have been arrested as well.

Once we arrived at the *Champs Elysées*, all the stress we had accumulated during our walk vanished when we saw how many people had already gathered and with what enthusiasm. The first great news of the day was that, somehow, a lot of people were still well equipped. To be honest, we don't know how they pulled this off. The second great news was the large number of individuals present on the avenue. A lot of people seemed really determined. Every time tear gas canisters were shot or stun grenades exploded, the crowd was cheering. These scenes were completely strange.

Some journalists from BFM—a 24-hour news channel—positioned on a rooftop were on the receiving end of vigorously expressed insults. While we disapprove of the terms that were used, it is important to note that the collective experience shared during demonstrations develops some common reactions even among those who are “not activists.”

All the ingredients were present for the situation to become explosive. We decided to leave the *Champs Elysées* in order to meet up with other friends. There were lots of people at the next meeting point, as well. The crowd was clearly more “autonomous and radical” than in the *Champs Elysées*; we saw more black clothes than yellow vests. It only took a few seconds for the timeless chant “Siamo tutti antifascisti!” (“We are all anti-fascists”) to ring out. The march began moving, but very calmly. So far, there was no real property damage, just a few small attacks on urban furniture. We decided to divide up, again. Unfortunately, we were not able to meet again for almost two hours—our communication tools being completely useless under the circumstances.

We wandered the streets with the feeling that we were always arriving after the battles, hearing incomplete reports about confrontations elsewhere in the city. We went back and forth on the major arteries without a clear target while trying to contact other friends.

Tension was high throughout the entire city. More and more of the roads were obstructed by trees, debris, and trash bins. We saw tanks racing in the direction of the *Champs Elysées*. It is noteworthy that at this point in the day, the police presence in the area shifted from omnipresent to sporadic. It seemed, according to what people told us, that something was burning at the *Champs Elysées*.

From where we were standing, a huge blaze could be seen. We had finally found our destination. Once we arrived on site, however, it appeared that once again, we had missed the events.

Not at all! An angry and determined crowd of hundreds was coming in our direction. Half a dozen CRS (riot police) trucks tried to go through the crowd. People reacted by throwing stones and other projectiles at them; then CRS units on foot charged and chased the crowd. After a sprint and a good rush of fear and adrenaline, we decided to meet up on a major artery. There, people were smashing all the windows while a tobacco store was looted.

The atmosphere was incredible. The crowd was characterized by a collective serenity—probably due to the large numbers present in the streets and the fact that there was no sign of police on the horizon. There was an atmosphere of joy: every time the window of a corporate chain store was smashed, people cheered, sang, or laughed. We had never experienced such a thing before.

The march continued for another two or three kilometres, leaving nothing intact behind us and building makeshift barricades all along our route. Then, people informed us that a nervous group of policemen were waiting for us a little further ahead. This is when we decided that it was a good opportunity to disperse and quit while we were ahead.

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## Mixed Feelings

In the end, December 8 was a strange mix of defeats and victories.

The day started out perfectly for the government; its trap was working. Early in the morning, police forces were already on alert to search and arrest any potential threat. Controls took place in the streets, at roadblocks, and in train stations around Paris. Every single person with a gas mask, goggles, or alleged projectiles was immediately arrested. Numerous potential demonstrators were put in custody simply for carrying a scarf and swimming goggles to protect them from the inevitable tear gas, like this person in Bordeaux.

By 10:30 am, about 354 people were already arrested, with 127 of them were put in custody. All day long, the number of arrestees continued to increase, reaching the gigantic number of 1082 people arrested in Paris with more than 900 in custody.

The preventative controls and arrests, as well as the massive presence of police, thwarted a new insurrectionary outburst in the French capital city. For the most part, Saturday morning was relatively calm; no confrontations or destructions were reported in the *Champs Elysées*. Around 10:30 am, some yellow vesters succeeded in blocking the Parisian beltway near *Porte Maillot*. Police forces brought the action to an end without using force.

In other words, all morning, it seemed that the authorities had the upper hand. The feeling of being defeated before the battle had even begun spread among our ranks, and with it, the frustration and fear of state repression increased.

Then, around midday, the situation started to change. At the *Champs-Elysées*, the strategy of the “pressure cooker”—containing demonstrators in a closed area while increasing the pressure—led to the first confrontations and damages. For example, some yellow vesters attacked a store and tried to break in. BAC agents and other officers unleashed their rage and inflicted the day’s first serious injuries on demonstrators. Fortunately, several teams of street medics were present to provide first aid. Unfortunately, near 2 pm, at the *Champs Elysées*, a 20-year-old woman lost an eye due to shrapnel from a grenade thrown by police.

As the accounts illustrate, in the afternoon, protestors succeeded in turning the tables by outmaneuvering the police. In this situation—facing massive numbers of preventative arrests and a city under siege—creating a breach was not easy. Our decisions to remain—for the most part—outside of the checkpoints imposed by the government and the areas where clashes were occurring with police enabled us to act and move freely, and eventually to give vent to our rage.

In the end, taking everything into account, the actions of December 8 were *more* effective than those of the previous week. To begin with, the fact that most stores, museums, theaters, and other institutions decided to close on a Saturday before Christmas already qualifies as a serious disruption with an impact on the French economy. On December 10, the Minister of the Economy held the yellow vest movement responsible for the fact that France lost “0.1 percent of growth of our national wealth during the last quarter.” According to the Mayor of Paris, the actions of December 8 inflicted more damage than those of the preceding week.

## **Meanwhile, Elsewhere in France...**

While the French government and national media were focused on the situation in Paris, something just as important—if not more—was happening in other cities. The yellow vest movement began as a decentralized phenomenon; on its first day of mobilization, about 2000 actions took place in France. For this fourth nationwide day of action, about 136,000 individuals participated, creating an explosive situation in several cities.

### **Dijon**

In Dijon, this day of action was less explosive than the previous one had been. As had become usual since the beginning of the movement, the demonstration took the same route and ended near the local prefecture, where confrontations erupted with police. However, the authorities had

changed their strategy since the previous week and anticipated the intentions of the crowd. Anti-riot fences protected the prefecture building and officers deployed massive quantities of rubber bullets and tear gas against protestors. As a result, numerous people were injured, one with a fractured jawbone.

In addition to providing a report of Saturday's demonstration, the authors of this report mention the difficulty of dealing with racist and misogynist behavior within the movement, while insisting on the necessity of not deserting it. While at some point the movement was unpredictable, now it has become a known quantity; the authors mention that they have the impression that they have reached a kind of impasse. However, they still express hope for the future. Since the beginning of the movement in Dijon, they have seen useful practices propagate in demonstrations, including participants wearing proper equipment and establishing teams of street medics. During the last demonstration, a connection arose between yellow vesters and members of the Climate March. Now, the important thing is to make sure that these alliances can last past the holidays.

## **Lyons**

In Lyons, the situation was more difficult. People started gathering in the morning for the Climate March. Between 7000 and 10,000 individuals showed up, but the march was disappointing. On the bright side, the march showed solidarity with the student movement and some yellow vesters were also present among the crowd. Later, rumors circulated concerning the presence of numerous well-known fascists within the yellow vest contingent; the author of this article confirms the presence of fascists.

In Lyons, fascists are quite active in the yellow vest movement, which makes the situation difficult for anarchists and others. So far, it seems almost impossible for radicals to take part in the movement there. At the end of the day, police forces dispersed crowds of demonstrators in downtown Lyons with tear gas, which also impacted passers-by.

## **Toulouse**

On December 8, Toulouse was burning. During the preceding weeks, several calls had been made in order to create a real bloc that Saturday. Yellow vesters, students, anarchists, and others individuals were determined to take the streets that day. The demonstration hadn't even started when the first confrontations took place with police. This time, the rear part of the demonstration was the center of the clashes. As usual, police shot rubber bullets and tear gas canisters, which only escalated the situation.

The streets of Toulouse descended into a state of siege warfare and the first barricades were set on fire. The law enforcement strategy failed completely, as the angry crowd dispersed into nearby streets and continued to riot. In terms of strategy, the rear of the march occupied police in confrontations, which enabled the rest of the march to continue its course. Altogether, four different wildcat demonstrations were moving through the city at the same time. At 5:30 pm, despite the prefecture's efforts, yellow vesters succeeded in marching through downtown Toulouse and reaching the *Capitole* (City Hall). Confrontations continued until late that night, especially in the *Saint Cyprien* district. Due to the chaotic situation, police forces even shot tear gas canisters from their helicopter.

## Marseille

In Marseille, yellow vesters, environmentalists, residents who were angry about urban policies, and students took the streets together on December 8. In the morning, about 2000 yellow vesters gathered in the *vieux port* (the old port) and moved towards the prefecture. Unfortunately, far-right tendencies were present in the march, including rhetoric against migrants and radical leftists. Some participants were even asking the police to join the demonstration. Once the march came back near downtown, yellow vesters tried to get closer to the main City Hall. Police shot the first tear gas canisters at that point and pushed demonstrators back towards the *Canebière*. The first fashion store was looted as police repeatedly charged several groups of protestors and rioters.

Around 4 pm, more than 5000 individuals arrived from the *Castellane* district. This procession was composed of climate marchers and angry locals. All the different marches and crowds were converging on the *Canebière*. The different components of the crowd expressed solidarity; everyone was there with the same purpose. Police forces started increasing the pressure by tear-gassing the crowd. Officers of the BAC were also present, mostly to protect stores and other possible targets.

That didn't stop people from attacking and looting several stores, banks, and ATMs. Police forces continued to push back the crowd. Once the crowd reached the *Soléam* building—a company in charge of the urban planning—every single window was smashed. Confrontations lasted for several hours as barricades and trash bins were set on fire; the Chamber of Commerce's Christmas trees were set on fire.

Police finally dispersed the rioting crowd with tanks. However, the riots continued further: new barricades were erected and set aflame; a parking meter was attacked; jewelry stores were looted. The cat and mouse game between police forces and rioters ended around 8 pm. The authorities arrested about 60 people and injured many more.

## Bordeaux

In Bordeaux, the situation was quite intense. Everything started around 1 pm, when a group of 100–200 high school students joined the demonstration called for by local yellow vesters. According to local media outlets, 7000 people were already gathering on the docks. The atmosphere was quite friendly but also determined.

A joyous crowd started walking through the city in order to reach the City Hall. Passing through the *rue Sainte-Catherine*, the city's chief shopping street, demonstrators mingled with bystanders shopping for the holidays. Some stores started closing their doors upon seeing the crowd. The march reached the *Place Pey Berland*, the main square where the Cathedral and the City Hall are located.

Rapidly, the square filled with people. Around 4 pm, some projectiles were thrown at police, who responded with the first tear gas grenades of the day. The situation continued to escalate for about two hours, as yellow vesters and students resisted police charges, tear gas, and rubber bullets. At least one individual was injured by a rubber bullet impact to the face.

Around 6 pm, police forces received the order to clear the square. A rain of tear gas canisters fell upon the protestors. Then police forces shifted to stun-grenades. A young man lost his hand as a consequence of trying to protect the demonstrators from one of these.



Due to the intensity of the confrontations, the crowd dispersed into the neighboring streets. Some protestors took this opportunity to erect barricades, some which caught fire; several banks were attacked; surveillance cameras were smashed; trash bins were set on fire; windows were smashed. A cat and mouse game took place pitting rioters against BAC agents in the streets of Bordeaux.

After a final massive police charge, the groups of rioters dispersed. In their escape, one group attacked and looted an Apple Store and set one last barricade on fire. In total, 69 people were arrested, 54 of whom were taken in to custody.

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Altogether, according to the Minister of the Interior, the fourth nationwide day of action in France ended up with a total of 1723 arrests, with 1380 people put in custody. Since the beginning of the yellow vest movement, more than 3300 individuals have been arrested, 2354 have been put in custody, and more than 1200 have already seen trial.

## **And Outside France?**

There have been several attempts to ignite copycat movements elsewhere around Europe and the world. Protesters are donning yellow vests in Israel. In Egypt, the military tyrant al-Sisi forbade merchants from selling yellow vests ahead of the upcoming anniversary of the Egyptian revolution; in Tunisia, people launched a Facebook page proposing a “red vest” movement; in Iraq, demonstrators in Basra dusted off vests they had worn in a similar protest movement in 2015.

### **Belgium**

Brussels saw the largest yellow vest demonstration outside France on December 8, with major traffic disruptions, clashes with police, and 460 arrests. The participants were largely middle class and white, but not entirely so. One demonstrator carried a sign opposing fascism; another, no to taxes and no to the immigration agreement. The person holding the sign opposing immigration was booed by the other demonstrators.

### **The Netherlands**

In the Netherlands, the yellow vest movement has largely emerged from the far right. *Gele Hesjes* Facebook groups appeared around December 1 and grew quickly. That day, small demonstrations drew dozens of participants in a few cities. On December 8, there were demonstrations in more cities, with 200 participants in Rotterdam, about 100 in Amsterdam and The Hague, and dozens of participants in several other towns.

At the demonstration in The Hague on December 1, yellow vest demonstrators displayed fascist symbols including the so-called Prinsenvlag, an old version of the Dutch national flag that has only been utilized by fascists since 1945. Members of several extreme right-wing groups were involved. On December 8, two prominent right-wing reactionaries participated in the demonstration in The Hague, one from Pegida, the other from the PVV, the party of Dutch fascist Geert

Wilders. A portrait of the fascist icon Pim Fortuyn could be seen on the yellow vest of one of the participants.

In Nijmegen, where the chief organizer has extreme right wing connections, the fascist group Identitair Verzet handed out stickers to yellow vest demonstrators inside the demonstration. In Amsterdam, one demonstrator wore a yellow vest emblazoned with the letters FVD (Forum voor Democratie), a fascist party with two seats in parliament, even more openly racist than de PVV.

The movement in Amsterdam seems to be the least dominated by the far right, so far, with anarchists distributing literature and engaging participants in discussion on December 8.

Of course, not all the demonstrators are fascists. You see many complaints about budget cuts, health care structures in disrepair, issues that it makes sense to be angry about. But these are often connected to complaints about the European Union, so-called “globalism,” and so on. Much of the Gele Hesjes discourse has focused on a United Nations agreement on immigration called the Marrakesh pact. In fact, the agreement simply confirms laws and treaties already in place. According to right-wing disinformation, however, this pact means that Europe invites “all of Africa” to come, while outlawing any criticism of migration. It is amazing how many people appear to believe this nonsense.

Under these conditions, most of the left are understandably hostile to the yellow vests movement in the Netherlands. It is an open question whether anarchists could have been the first ones to initiate Yellow Hesjes groups and thereby set a different discourse. Hesitation, followed by relief when one’s suspicions are confirmed, can cede the space of social unrest to the far right—with disastrous consequences.

A new Facebook group has appeared now under the name Rode Hesjes, “red vests,” stressing solidarity and rejecting racist tactics of divide and conquer. This seems to be a classic left project, making demands to the government and setting itself apart from the rest of the generalized unrest.

## **Germany**

Developments in Germany have been mostly farcical; a few far-right groups initially attempted to popularize the yellow vest model, without success. One Nazi group held its regular demonstration in yellow vests. As usual, the majority of German anti-fascists expressed suspicion about the popular movement, though a few groups oriented towards class-war politics criticized this attitude.

Anti-fascists in Dortmund organized their own yellow vest demonstration on the weekend of December 8, addressing the contradictions within the movement. In conservative southern Germany, an institutional left group in Munich is calling for yellow vest demonstrations, and the left party Die Linke has endorsed the movement.

Entertainingly, a German anarchist apparently started one of the popular yellow vest twitter accounts as a prank, attempting to use satire to mock the conspiracy theories within the right-wing elements of the movement. Unfortunately, this is a bad era for satire, and right-wing German yellow vesters took even the most outlandish tweets seriously until the prank was revealed.

## Aftermath

On Monday, December 10, President Macron delivered an official speech on national television. He acknowledged that the country is currently in “an economical and social state of emergency.” In light of this, he personally asked the government and the parliament to do whatever is necessary to make it possible for people to live decently from their jobs starting next year. Alongside these statements, Macron presented new political measures—including increasing minimum wage by €100 a month starting next year; offering tax exemption on overtime; asking employers to offer Christmas bonuses; cancelling tax on pensions under €2000 a month—in order to answer some of the yellow vesters’ demands.

On Tuesday, December 11, Prime Minister Edouard Philippe presented the new government’s decisions before the National Assembly and reaffirmed the wish to find a mutual agreement quickly in order to exit this month-long political and social crisis.

So far, it is difficult to evaluate the real impact that Macron’s speech will have on the yellow vest movement’s future. For the most part, political parties—the populist left and the far-right nationalists—jumped on this occasion to denounce the President’s measures and the legitimacy of the actual government. While some yellow vesters—mostly “legalists”—seem satisfied with the government’s announcement and think it is time for the yellow vest movement to accept dialogue, others describe the situation as a farce and aim to continue the fight. Another day of action has been called for Saturday, December 15.

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## Reflections

The yellow vest movement continues to surprise everyone on account of its duration, its determination, and its capacity to assume new forms. A month ago, no one imagined that such chaos and political instability were about to unfold in France. Despite numerous attempts to establish dialogue, pacify the social base, and isolate the most radical fringe, the movement is still alive and unpredictable.

The focus of the movement has slowly shifted. Several weeks ago, the participants concentrated on protesting the increase of fuel and gas prices and the high cost of living; now, there is more attention on the government and the systemic causes of our difficult living situations.

Moreover, part of the movement has also succeeded in opening its ranks to other demonstrators and causes. In the beginning, the movement was almost exclusively composed of people wearing yellow vests and pushing the associated demands; last Saturday in Paris, we saw students, rail workers, climate marchers, trade unionists, individuals from the suburbs, anarchists, autonomous rebels, and “rioters without adjectives” joining the yellow vesters in the street fights. This convergence seems to have pushed the movement towards a more social, leftist, and anti-capitalist approach, and opening up space for marginalized people to participate.

For example, in their collective charter, some yellow vesters are asking for the end of French pillaging, political interference, and military occupation in African countries. In a surprising letter published on November 9, several radical yellow vesters proposed an analysis of the current situation based on anti-capitalist and anti-statist arguments. They concluded by saying:

“No, our violence is not bad! No, our violence is not violent! No, our violence is a deliverance! Our violence is not bloodthirsty, it is salutary! Now, let us be governed by ourselves, and let’s trust our creative power!”

Others have distributed a text entitled “Vests of All Colors” at several different yellow vest blockades:

“Our vests are rainbow colored because we refuse the false solutions to the current crisis: the flight towards an even more liberal capitalism and the nationalist and xenophobic withdrawal... There is no more reform to do, there is a world to build.”

### **The Threat of Nationalist Cooptation**

Yet the movement has also involved populists, nationalists, and fascists. The so-called “apolitical” façade in the early stages of the movement enabled far-right nationalists and populist leftists to create connections with the movement and take advantage of its anger for political purposes. This is not surprising, since many of the demonstrators share common ideas with those parties. Regarding the possible end result of the movement, it wouldn’t be surprising to see the leftist populist party *France Insoumise* or the far-right nationalist *Rassemblement National* emerge victorious from this political crisis.

This is what our comrades from Dijon experienced last Saturday, when they were confronted with xenophobia, homophobia and misogyny during the yellow vest demonstration. The situation in Lyons is troubling in that local fascists are well organized and are using this movement as a platform to spread their ideas.

In Paris, fascist groups have been seen since the beginning of the yellow vest movement. Thankfully, anti-fascists are doing everything they can to keep them off the streets.

However, some comrades say that to the extent that nationalists have been marginalized within the yellow vest movement, this has not been accomplished by street attacks so much as by expanding the activities of the movement to include tactics—such as property destruction—that are incompatible with right-wing politics. Fascists were able to represent street conflicts with police as a righteous struggle against the forces of centrist neoliberalism, but they have no narrative to legitimize property destruction and rioting.

Minimizing or ignoring the presence of fascists within the movement is dangerous. Considering the political and ideological connections many participants share with populist and nationalist parties, the tables could turn overnight. This makes it especially important to attack and delegitimize fascists who wish to participate in the movement, to come up with discourse and strategies that offer them no footholds within the movement, and above all to organize effective anti-capitalist measures addressing the economic problems that confront so many people today.

We also must strategize about what to do if nationalists are able to capitalize on the political turmoil resulting from the movement. Even if nationalists are marginalized in the streets, they could still take advantage of the situation to win power in the government. We should be ready for that situation, as well.

## **And after the Crest?**

For some of us, the events of December 8 were a partial failure because the situation was not as uncontrollable as on December 1, and because the crowds never mustered the courage to confront the police directly. Many people felt overwhelmed by the situation. This seems to indicate that the movement is reaching a plateau, if not an impasse. If things do not shift again, the movement will eventually cycle down and die, at least in Paris.

On the other hand, other comrades consider last Saturday a huge success. While the authorities deployed unprecedented police force nationwide and sent a threatening message to any individual who wanted to demonstrate, thousands of people still found the courage to take the streets, and many of them eventually succeeded in outmaneuvering the police. In Paris, the riots lasted for about seven hours. In the end, there was more overall economic damage than the previous week, which compensates for the fact that crowds rarely engaged in frontal confrontations with the police.

Yet here, too, we see the risk of stagnation. The yellow vest movement still lacks a way to expand the horizon beyond blocking traffic, confronting police, and destroying symbols of capitalism. Of course, one could make the same criticism of the police strategy—though the police, too, have shown themselves to be capable of shifting their approach. The tactics of the movement have created a political crisis, but mere escalation is a game that the state can play as well—at least within a limited space.

One option would be to intensify occupations alongside blockades and riots—as some yellow vesters did in Saint Nazaire and some students are doing in their high schools and universities. This could create a space for discussion, in which people could develop deeper ties within the movement. It would offer another model for bringing pressure to bear on the state while also putting the participants in touch with their own power to create alternatives.

In any case, with the Christmas holidays approaching, the calendar itself—that ancient weapon to contain social struggles within the existing order—is against the movement. The greater question is how the yellow vest movement will have changed the long-term conditions and horizon of possibility in France and around the world.

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