

# **Yellow Vestiges: Inside the Riots of March 16**

**How the Gilets Jaunes Outlasted Repression, “Dialogue,” and Co-optation**

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Against all odds, the yellow vest movement is still alive more than four months after it erupted onto the French political stage. To the surprise of many, it drew a breath of fresh air last weekend in a new outbreak of rioting in Paris, proving that it has lost neither its fierce determination nor its unpredictable and unruly power. Anarchists and other anti-authoritarian participants seem to have outlasted every effort by police to crush the movement by brute force, by politicians to co-opt it into fruitless “dialogue,” by “leaders” to pacify and dominate it, by fascists to use it as a recruiting platform. It remains to be seen whether the developments in France will spread elsewhere around the world and whether the far right or other actors will be able to capitalize on the disorder to impose a new and even more repressive order in France. But the trajectory of the movement up to March 16 shows that the conflicts that generated it cannot easily be suppressed and offers a model for how to outlast repression and co-optation.

This grassroots movement has come a long way since it emerged in response to the French government’s decision to increase taxes on gas for “ecological” purposes. Developing outside the stranglehold of trade unions and political parties, this new model for a supposedly “apolitical” and “decentralized” movement has unsettled the longstanding ritualized framework of social and political struggles in France.

As a heterogeneous space, the yellow vest movement became a battleground where anarchists and other rebels were compelled to fight simultaneously against the state and its police and against reactionaries and fascists within the movement.

The number of arrests, trials, and injuries has surpassed those of any traditional social movement in years. The yellow vest movement sustained momentum throughout December despite brutal repression and state violence, government efforts to establish dialogue with the self-proclaimed “leaders,” political concessions intended to pacify the population, official calls to restore calm and order, and the time-honored strategy of forcing “good demonstrators” to dissociate themselves from “rioters” via threats. The movement even succeeded in defying the calendar: tens of thousands of demonstrators took the streets for the first national day of action of 2019.

The movement progressively lost momentum after the beginning of 2019 amid signs of strategic disarray. Yet last Saturday, on March, 16, 2019—the eighteenth act of the mobilization—the yellow vests once more became a raging wave that controlled the streets of Paris for a full day. The scenes of rioting and confrontation echoed the movement’s early days.

The future and legacy of the yellow vest movement remain uncertain. From one week to another its magnitude, character, and intensity seem to swing from one extreme to the other, at least in Paris. Yet it is significant that despite internal divisions, political attempts at co-optation, and the authorities’ New Year’s resolutions to clear the blockades from every road by any means necessary and pacify the situation via a national debate so people would express their discontent through legally sanctioned channels, the mood of defiance has not been tamed.

Last weekend’s chaos was a clear message to the French government that the movement has not fallen into its trap of dialogue and direct democracy. This is not surprising, considering the weeks of brutal state violence and class contempt that the demonstrators have experienced. Once more, the yellow vest phenomenon has thwarted the government’s plan. Macron and his henchmen thought that after the national debate, they could finally get back to implementing their neoliberal agenda.

The eighteenth act of the yellow vest movement proves that anarchists and other autonomous rebels still play an important role within the movement, retaining the capacity to open up new

horizons. To explore all this in greater detail, we present the following update. This report picks up where our previous analysis left off, in the aftermath of the nationwide day of action of January, 5, 2019.

## Searching for Momentum in All the Wrong Places

At the beginning of 2019, the yellow vest movement in Paris faced an identity crisis. The inner scissions between its “legalist” and die-hard tendencies, as well as the constant increasing pressure from media and authorities, were clearly affecting the movement. Fearing that the movement might not survive until the end of the national debate on March 15, 2019, let alone until the European elections in May, participants decided that they had no choice but to restructure and develop new strategies.

The results only made the situation worse. As explored here, organizers decided that, from then on, all demonstrations would be officially declared and permitted by the authorities. In doing so, these “leaders” hoped to make the authorities more lenient towards the movement in order that the repression might finally decrease. Not only was this new strategy a complete rupture with the “illegal” approach that the movement had embraced from the beginning, it also gave the government an opportunity to control and contain every action.

In addition, some yellow vest “leaders” who had not previously condemned the use of violence during demonstrations began to change their discourse, using pacifist and anti-riot rhetoric during interviews or communiqués, adopting a position similar to that of corporate media and the government. For a movement that initially rejected all forms of political structure from trade unions to political parties, it is difficult to understand why organizers suddenly decided to create their own security groups to supervise the crowd.

These strategies were clearly copied from the methods usually used by traditional trade unions. But an even more concerning issue emerged around these so-called security guards. Starting January 5, 2019, individuals wearing paramilitary berets and outfits were seen at the front of yellow vest marches. It eventually came out that the self-proclaimed leader of this yellow vest security service is Victor Lenta, a well-known far-right activist and ex-paratrooper who participated in the Donbass war alongside Russian troops during the Ukrainian uprising. For several weeks, Lenta and his friends have been in charge of “assuring the security” of the yellow vest movement, and some yellow-vested “leaders” considered the political affiliations of these men less important than their role in the demonstrations.

Yet again, we see the yellow vest movement haunted by its unsuccessful struggle to dissociate itself from reactionaries. The fact that members of the far right were in charge of security enabled other fascist groups to gain a foothold. On January 26, 2019, for the second week in a row, a group of fascists, known as *Zouaves*, attacked the anti-racist and anti-capitalist march. The following weeks, anti-fascists and other yellow vesters struck back, expelling fascists from the demonstrations. Elsewhere in France, similar struggles took place, notably in Lyons, where the streets became a battlefield between fascists and anti-fascists.

In the end, the attempt to restructure the movement was a complete failure. The organizers sacrificed momentum and spontaneity in becoming answerable to the authorities, who imposed a specific route on each demonstration and flanked each march from start to finish. What’s more,

the brutal police repression did not cease! As a result, the yellow vest “leaders” reconsidered their decision of declaring their demonstrations to the authorities.

However, this strategic mistake had strong after-effects. As a consequence, it seemed that the movement had lost its offensive character. Saturday demonstrations became peaceful marches through the city with only a few confrontations, nothing more than one might expect during a traditional trade union demonstration. Week after week, even if the number of demonstrators was stable, it became obvious that the movement had reached a plateau, if not a dead end.

Another aspect of this decline is the fact that the movement has largely abandoned one of the cornerstones of its original success. Several months ago, widespread traffic circle occupations and road blockades comprised the movement’s lifeblood. Today, the movement mostly relies on weekly ritualized demonstrations in a few major French cities to stay alive.

Facing all these changes and the erosion of momentum, would the yellow vests movement be able to survive the national debate?

## **The State Looks Forward to the End of the Movement**

Since mid-December, the French government sought to pacify the political situation via a variety of strategies: making some concessions to answer certain demands, being “open to dialogue,” and establishing an official “national debate” in which people could express their frustration without blocking traffic or burning things. In doing so, the government hoped to quench the thirst for direct democracy some yellow vesters expressed, especially through the demand for a Citizens’ Initiative Referendum (RIC).

However, these strategies did not suffice to get everyone to stop demonstrating. The government increased police violence in hopes of pressuring people off the streets. As a consequence, they continued to injure a tremendous number of people, as detailed here. (Trigger warning: some of these images are quite painful to see.)

By February, it seemed that the government was finally getting the upper hand. The yellow vest movement was losing momentum as the weekly demonstrations became less and less offensive. At this point, the French government was already projecting itself into the post-yellow vest era.

The government had plans for the future. Aware that the global social, economic and political situation will likely continue to worsen over the following years, the French government wanted to make sure that it would have all the tools necessary to prevent or rapidly repress any kind of social disruption, upheaval, or insurrection. Taking an aggressive if predictable authoritarian turn, last January the government presented a proposal for a new law against rioters: *la loi “anticasseurs.”*

Among other things, this legislation proposes that police should be allowed to search any individual, bag, or vehicle near the area of a demonstration in order to find possible weapons. The law would enable prefects to issue official documents prohibiting individuals from demonstrating if they are considered a potential threat to public order—in the same way that judicial judges already do today. Individuals who are not allowed to demonstrate would be automatically added to the police data file of wanted persons. “The act of intentionally hiding part or all of one’s face without a legitimate reason” during a demonstration would be considered a crime punishable with a one-year prison sentence and a €15,000 fine. Finally, people responsible for property damage would have to pay for it, even if not sentenced for their actions.

It is undeniable that this proposed anti-rioting law is designed to repress anarchists and other autonomous rebels first; but, as with any law, it will then expand its spectrum of applications to include any other potential threat. All these elements directly target our long-shared tactics of anonymity, property damage, and street confrontation. The war between the state and anarchists continues.

This proposed law was composed after the insurrectionary situations at the beginning of the yellow vest movement. So far, the National Assembly and the Senate have passed this law. It is now being reviewed by the *Conseil Constitutionnel*—an institution responsible for deciding whether proposed legislation conforms to the Constitution.

As the political experiment of the national debate was coming to an end, the French government was hoping that starting Friday, March 15, 2019, it could draw a line after the four months of the yellow crisis. What could go wrong? The yellow vest moment was now harmless, and the national day of action planned on March 9, 2019 was one of the smallest mobilizations that the movement had seen.

## **A Potentially Explosive Situation**

Once again, the French government underestimated the explosive potential of the situation, both nationally and worldwide. For several weeks now, high school and university students have been going on strike every Friday to call attention to climate change. These strikes took place simultaneously in several countries at once. The chief objective is for the new generations to increase the pressure on their respective governments regarding environmental issues. This is why on Saturday, March 16, 2019, environmental organizations made a national call to demonstrate for climate justice and the environment.

Meanwhile, for the many yellow vesters who rejected dialogue with the government, the end of the national debate had nothing to do with whether the movement should end. A new call for a national day of action went out. Yellow vesters were invited to celebrate the end of the national debate by converging in Paris on March 16. On the same day, several collectives of undocumented people, victims of police violence, and leftist organizations made a call for a solidarity march to demonstrate against racism and police violence.

Understanding the potential of such a day of action, some radicals published a text entitled *Ultimatum* inviting everyone to join the struggles in Paris and elsewhere around France. In this text, the authors draw a connection between the situation in France and the current uprising in Algeria against President Bouteflika and his heavy-handed form of government. They stated that “*Waiting has been our only mistake, forever. And convincing us to wait is the art of all rulers,*” and concluded thus:

“Never, as in this epoch of apocalypse, has the slogan “revolution or death!” had more concrete meaning, and more scientifically confirmed. The maintenance of the present social organization is tantamount to suicide, and none among the capitalists intends to yield less to his rapacity. Only while some saw in revolutions the “locomotives of history,” we now see that they are rather the emergency brake. We must stop everything and rethink everything. It can be scary, but we have never seen sixty million people starve. And what we found in the heat of the roundabouts is the simplicity of organizing in good intelligence, each from his situation. And then, in

truth, faced with governments that have set course for the worst, we have no choice. In Paris on March 16, and everywhere else in France afterwards, what better season than spring to get back on the ground? And what more beautiful spring than the end of the misery of the economy?”

The tone was set!

## **Actions speak Louder than Words**

It would be impossible to detail all the events that took place in the streets of Paris on March 16. Here, we draw on narratives from several anarchists and autonomous rebels, complemented by information from corporate media and other sources.

### **Report #1**

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

At 10 am, the author answered the call to gather in front of the *Saint-Lazare* train station, before joining the yellow vest demonstration at the *Champs-Élysées*. Rapidly, hundreds of people started moving towards their destination. The first slogans against President Macron rang out in the rich districts of Paris. Reaching *Rue de la Boétie* under the collective chant of “*Paris, Paris, soulève-toi!*” (“Paris, Paris, rise up!”) the crowd comprised about a thousand people. After passing through several streets and crossing a shopping arcade, the march reached its morning objective: the *Champs-Élysées*.

At 11 am, the author decided to get closer to the *Arc de Triomphe*, located at the top of the famous Parisian avenue. Battles had already started there. A mounted water cannon was in full use to disperse groups of rioters; dozens of police trucks and two tanks were protecting the national monument; demonstrators were attacking police forces with cobblestones and other projectiles despite a rain of tear gas canisters.

According to the author, the general atmosphere was similar to that during the second act of the yellow vest movement on November 24, 2018. Demonstrators were not dissociating themselves from radicals and rioters—confirming that in the collective imaginary, “violence and physical confrontation are understood as necessary to resist capitalist violence and the violence of its agents.”

Around 1 pm, the author left the *Champs-Élysées* in order to join the Solidarity March in the district of *Madeleine*. Walking down the avenue, they realized that the street actions weren’t only concentrated near the *Arc de Triomphe*. Burning barricades were covering the street; stores had been looted and their front windows smashed; walls were covered with poetic graffiti; and the *Fouquet’s*—an expensive Parisian brasserie that politicians like ex-president Nicolas Sarkozy are fond of—had been sacked and partly set on fire.

Unfortunately for the author, it was impossible to leave the *Champs-Élysées*, as police were blocking all the major exits. They continued walking up and down the avenue while observing scenes of joyful chaos. While some rioters looted every store in the avenue, others were constantly attacking and harassing law enforcement. The *Fouquet’s* caught fire for a second time while police continued to cover the street in tear gas.

Around 5 pm, demonstrators finally succeeded in exiting the avenue via an adjoining street. As the crowd departed from the *Champs-Élysées*, every single sports vehicle and luxury car was vandalized—one was even set on fire. The crowd slowly exited the perimeter controlled by law enforcement and continued its route towards the *Saint-Lazare* train station—and later on, the *Place de la République*. Again, every bank and luxury store was attacked, and numerous makeshift barricades appeared to slow the police. Unfortunately, this was not enough: near *Bonne Nouvelle*, police trucks arrived and dispersed the crowd.

## Report #2

*Some friends who were also present in the streets of Paris contributed this short report on the events of March 16.*

For this new day of action in Paris, we decided to wait a bit before joining the various demonstrations, hoping to collect further information about the police strategy and to obtain a broader perspective on the general situation in the morning in order to prepare ourselves accordingly. When it was only 11 am, we understood that most of the street confrontations were happening near the *Arc de Triomphe* and that their intensity was already setting the tone for the rest of the day. This is why we decided to go to the *Champs-Élysées* first.

As usual, the authorities had closed numerous metro stations in order to better control the situation. When we arrived at *Saint-Phillipe du Roule*, we ran into a large wave of yellow vests who were flowing back from the avenue. It seemed that part of the crowd was unsure which direction to take. Nearby police seized this occasion to attack to crowd with tear gas canisters and rubber bullets. That was it—we were in the middle of our first street confrontations of the day. After this intense attack, lasting several seconds, if not minutes, the crowd of demonstrators was scattered throughout the entire district.

As the various access points to the *Champs-Élysées* were blocked by police, we decided to change our plans and go the opposite direction towards the *Madeleine* district where the Solidarity March was scheduled to take place at 13:12 pm. While leaving the area of our first confrontations, we noticed that the entire district—where the Ministry of the Interior and the Presidential Palace are located—was completely locked down by police forces. As we were slowly exiting the area with a crowd of yellow vests, six unmarked cars came our way at full speed. They passed us and stopped. Members of the BAC (Anti-Criminality Brigade) jumped out, opened their trunks, and grabbed their LBD launchers (rubber bullet riffles). This created a movement of panic. It was time to leave, and quickly.

Reaching the *Place de la Madeleine*, we were able to get a glimpse of the law enforcement apparatus and strategy for the day. Police units were present in every sensitive area: around the *Champs-Élysées* and near the train stations and the official demonstrations' meeting points. However, we were surprised to see that, for the most part, we were free to go wherever we wanted to. As soon as we reached *Madeleine*, we ran into a convoy of police trucks that was dispatched to block a major avenue in case the demonstration wanted to take another route.

As we were all waiting for the march to start, we decided to force the movement by taking another way. A crowd of radicals turned around the square, set a barricade on fire, passed in front of a police line, and started walking through a small street. The attempt to start a wildcat



demonstration failed, as a group of policemen with LBD guns were waiting for us at the next intersection. In the end, we went back and joined the Solidarity March.

Several thousand people took part in this march. It was supposed to join the demonstration against climate change at the *Place de l'Opéra* before moving towards the *Place de la République*. Unfortunately, the Solidarity March didn't bring what we expected; on this issue, we share the analysis of the author of this article. During the demonstration against racism and police violence, we saw several behaviors that we completely disapprove. In the manner of trade unions or political parties, the demonstration had decided to organize its own security service, the role of which was to make sure that everyone remained behind the front banner and followed their assigned roles. At one point, the procession crossed a group of undocumented people that was clearly showing solidarity to the march. Again, the security asked them to step aside and move to the sidewalk so the march could continue its course with no one blocking the view of the front banner. Such roles of control and authority are intolerable, especially considering that after this, the organizers chanted "*Tout le monde déteste la police!*" ("Everyone hates the police!")

Once we arrived at *Opéra*, we were confused as to what to do. In our opinion, the Solidarity March had been a real waste of time, and now we were in the middle of a gigantic crowd—up to 100,000 participants, according to the organizers—marching for the environment. We had doubts regarding the effectiveness of such a demonstration, and we were right. We decided to go up the demonstration until we reached *Place de la République*, discussing our next strategy and objectives along the way.

Once at *République*, we left the Solidarity March behind to continue its course until reaching *Stalingrad*, and the climate march, which was about to celebrate its political action with a big outdoor show during the evening. Our objective was clear: street confrontations and interesting events were still happening near the *Champs-Élysées*. Without further delay, we left the square and headed towards the avenue.

As we were approaching the *Champs-Élysées*, we walked through streets that showed the signs of intense riots and confrontations. Rubber bullets, tear gas canisters, and all kind of projectiles lay everywhere. Walls, cars, and front windows had been all destroyed; the vestiges of barricades were still visible; some comrades had lost their goggles and masks. Surprisingly, the streets were wrapped in silence, which only intensified the surreal atmosphere. Tension and adrenaline slowly rose until we reached our destination.

Once we entered the *Champs-Élysées*, the situation was completely euphoric. Far in front of us, the *Arc de Triomphe* was concealed by thick clouds of tear gas; the well-known high-standard brasserie *Fouquet's* was on fire; barricades were everywhere; groups of anarchists and other rebels were fiercely attacking police; others were targeting every store and restaurant, then sharing their loot with the rest of the crowd. The rage was unstoppable—every symbol of capitalism and its order had to fall!

In the middle of all this creative chaos, thousands of yellow vesters were showing their solidarity by participating in the actions or else discussing, chanting, cheering, or hugging each other. In other words, we were thousands of proud "accomplices" of what was happening on the "most beautiful avenue of the world." (The use of the term "accomplices" in the previous sentence is a direct reference to the vocabulary used by the authorities to threaten those who refuse to dissociate themselves from rioters.)

However, as police were progressively pushing us down the *Champs-Élysées* in order to kettle us at some point, we decided to exit the avenue via the same street we had taken to come in.

Among hundreds of yellow vesters, we walked through the devastated streets of this rich neighborhood, where every car that had remained untouched until then was attacked. Then, at the intersection between *avenue Franklin Roosevelt* and *rue du Colisée*, we passed the ruins of a bank that had been set on fire several hours before. Unfortunately, there were apartments above the bank; firemen had to evacuate inhabitants, including a woman and her baby. [If you ever find yourself considering setting a bank aflame, make sure you will not put anyone's life at risk—remember the Marfin tragedy in Greece.]

The yellow wave continued its route through the rich districts of Paris with a joyful and offensive atmosphere. As police were nowhere to be seen, some participants took the opportunity to expand property destruction tactics in other districts. Storefront windows, banks, and real estate agencies were attacked, and construction site material appeared in the street as makeshift barricades. As people had earlier that day, the crowd chanted “*Révolution! Révolution! Révolution!*”

We passed the *Saint-Lazare* train station, then turned to reach the luxurious Parisian department stores. They had to close their doors in a hurry, locking international shoppers and passers-by inside. Then we continued our course through the large boulevards that would lead us directly to *République*. There were still no signs of law enforcement, so some people continued to attack symbols of capitalism. Suddenly, arriving at *Bonne Nouvelle*, the presence of police forces created confusion among us. Due to our hesitation and lack of responsiveness, police units took this opportunity to block our progress, which created a moment of panic. As the result, the march dispersed.

We took this opportunity to vanish in the dim light of the evening.

### Report #3

*For this report, we summarized the concluding part of another personal account in order to add some additional elements to the general narrative.*

In the end of the afternoon, a massive wild demonstration left the *Champs-Élysées* and headed towards the *Grands Boulevards*. Everywhere things were smashed or burnt, people were cheering, screaming, making connections, talking, and, above all, expressing their hatred towards this world. The joyful and determined march of about 2000 people was never threatened by police forces. However, the authorities had two key strengths: the helicopter and the “*voltigeurs*”—police units on motorcycles armed with LBD launchers.

While the procession was marching towards *République*, a cordon of police forces blocked our way. Without thinking twice, we took the first street on the right. The wildcat march was now smaller; nevertheless, everyone decided to walk through the trendy district of *Montorgueil* in order to express our rage in this usually quiet and peaceful district.

Again, front windows were smashed and some stores were looted in a joyous atmosphere. Progressively, the wild wave of demonstrators was approaching the shopping district of *Châtelet Les Halles* and its police station. Suddenly, the crowd ran into an empty police car. Without thinking twice, the windows were smashed. Everyone wanted to participate in the destruction of this symbolic object.

As a tribute to all the comrades sentenced in the case of the police car set on fire during the *Loi Travail*, flames swallowed the vehicle. As several groups of “*voltigeurs*” arrived on site, the raging crowd dispersed.

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In the eighteenth act of the yellow vest movement in Paris, about 80 banks, real estate agencies, restaurants, luxury and fashion stores were attacked. Among them, about 20 were looted or set on fire. As described in this article, intense scenes of confrontation with police resulted in dozens of injuries. Someone lost an eye due to a rubber bullet; someone else suffered sinus and orbital floor fractures; a third person lost part of their foot due to a GLI-F4 grenade. In addition, 256 people were put in custody, of whom 101 were released without any further investigation.

Last Monday and Tuesday, 86 individuals were presented to a judge as a consequence of the events of Saturday. In the end, 23 people were sentenced to prison time, with one facing a year imprisonment; 19 received suspended sentences; 10 were sentenced to community service; six were discharged; one person received a fine; and 27 saw their trials postponed. Altogether, 17 people are in prison today for Saturday's events, either serving sentences or awaiting trial. In addition, the public prosecutor's department in Paris initiated two investigations involving 12 individuals, three of whom are already in detention.

In addition, since the beginning of the movement, judges have been delivering almost automatically a one-year ban on being in Paris to each person who goes to trial.

## **Did the Movement Fall into a Trap?**

Some, looking on from a distance, have implied that in engaging in self-defense and property destruction last Saturday, the movement fell into a trap intended to discredit it and legitimize state repression. Of course, it is true that the state is trying to use scenes of "violence" from last weekend to discredit the yellow vest movement; insofar as government depends on a monopoly of violence, every government must always struggle to discredit anyone who uses force to defend themselves against it. But Macron would certainly prefer for the movement to have already been pacified and harmless. Had there been no "violence" on Saturday, that would have confirmed that his strategy to create a civil dialogue had succeeded, which would have been more advantageous to him.

The idea that thousands of demonstrators fell into a trap planned by a few authority figures suggests the same sort of mindset that we associate with conspiracy theory. Imagining those who hold power to be omnipotent, conspiracy theorists attribute all events to the machinations of a few, denying themselves and others agency. This is a fundamentally paranoid and disempowering framework.

On March 16, the authorities had very clear orders regarding how to contain the demonstrations. In the past, authorities have changed their strategies according to what they were dealing with. During the *Loi Travail* demonstrations in 2016, close contact with police forces was the norm; last May Day, authorities decided to stay away from us to avoid any injuries in their ranks and let us smash everything, afterwards using the images to target radicals.

Regarding last week, it is possible that on the *Champs-Élysées*, police received the order to contain the crowd while avoiding contact with demonstrators as much as possible; we may never know. But the demonstrators were not "permitted" to get away with anything. Other groups of police were also attacking demonstrators at close range. There were confrontations in the neighboring streets involving police and rioters, and a great number of people were injured and

arrested. All this seems to undermine any supposition that the police planned to let property destruction happen strictly in the *Champs-Élysées* and got what they wanted.

Let us not forget, Macron had to cancel his holidays on the day of the riots in order to return to Paris in a hurry. The government met that night and fired three important officials; they are now facing another political crisis. What government would want this to happen? Even before the events of March 16, the yellow vests movement had already done more than 170 millions of euros in property damages. If they needed “violence” to discredit the movement, they already had enough “violence” to work with; permitting more to take place would be unforgivable from a capitalist perspective.

Nothing can be completely planned in advance. The scenes of chaos that took place were not prepared ahead of time. People simply seized opportunities. We should never underestimate our own power and our capacity to escape inertia and outmaneuver the authorities and their plans.

## What Now?

The yellow vests movement is not dead! Last Saturday exceeded our expectations. Who would have thought that, four months after its birth, the movement would still be capable of producing such intense moments? Once again, it has reshuffled the cards for the political situation in France, pushing the current government in its retrenchments.

Several weeks ago, we thought that the yellow vest movement had reached a plateau; now it is the government that is facing an impasse. As riots were taking place in Paris, President Macron had to cancel his holidays skiing in the French Pyrenees in order to hurry back to Paris to solve this new crisis.

On Saturday night, the French government improvised a meeting in the crisis room of the Ministry of the Interior. President Emmanuel Macron said: *“What happened at the Champs-Élysée is no longer a demonstration. These were people who wanted to destroy the Republic and everything with it. All those who were there are complicit.”* Macron promised a *“strong response”* from the government to these acts of violence.

As a first measure, the government dismissed the Prefect of Paris, Michel Delpuech—holding him responsible for the rioting—as well as two other persons in charge of security. However, as one journalist rightly says: *“In one afternoon at the Champs-Élysées, the head of the State has lost a good part of the political credit regained thanks to his risky bet of creating a national debate. At the time when the executive was perfecting its exit from the crisis, the social movement that was losing momentum returned to center stage.”*

The yellow vest movement emerged victorious from the last national day of action, and it is undeniable that anarchists and other autonomous rebels are partly responsible for this success. Comrades from all over France converged in Paris, granting us greater numbers than usual during the actions.

In doing so, we have been able to add our own tactics to the movement, thanks to our experience in street confrontations. While writing these lines, how can we not think, for example, of our courageous comrades who created a efficient and mobile offensive block protected by dozens of black umbrellas? All day long, our presence in the streets enabled the demonstrations to harass police forces and maintain a certain level of intensity and momentum, as well as also sharing important moments of solidarity with yellow vesters.

The other reason why the movement was able to defeat the government last weekend is that the yellow vesters present in the streets of Paris stayed side by side with rioters, even if they were not involved in street actions themselves. By doing so, they prove that the government's strategy of dissociating "good demonstrators" and "rioters" is completely obsolete. The government still doesn't understand how riots and other experiences in the streets can radically change individuals and their perceptions of the world that surround them. For example, last weekend at the *Champs-Élysées*, yellow vesters cheered when a group of autonomous rebels arrived near the *Arc de Triomphe* with a reinforced banner to confront police forces.

To highlight this, here are some of the new developments in the yellow vest movement since its origins. People are going to demonstrations now with at least goggles and bandanas or gas masks to protect themselves from tear gas; unfortunately, they are still too many people not covering their faces while engaging in street confrontations and property destruction or looting. Due to the brutal police violence since the beginning of the movement, most yellow vesters still present in the streets nowadays know exactly what the real purpose of police forces is; little by little, yellow vesters have started to use radical theoretical tools to describe their living conditions and their claims—such as the concept of class, state violence, and capitalism. Finally, even if it can be considered futile, for the first time last weekend, on several occasions yellow vesters chanted "*Révolution!*"

All this proves that, more than ever, strong connections are possible between autonomous rebels and yellow vesters on the basis of our shared experiences, mutual effort, and solidarity. So far, it is impossible to know what the next national day of action will bring—although the French government has requested the assistance of the army to protect some buildings—or even whether the movement will maintain the momentum it regained last week. However, it is undeniable that what happened and what has been collectively created over the last four months won't easily be erased.

The yellow vest movement has revealed the true nature of the French democratic and so-called progressive government, which, like any other form of government—from dictatorship to leftist social-democracy—is prepared to go to practically any lengths to protect its power and privileges and the system that establishes them in the first place. Due to the use of "excessive" force by French police during yellow vests demonstrations, the UN has requested an investigation.

But this atypical form of social movement has also proved its capacity to escape the inertia of the order that has been imposed on us. By connecting to others, sharing common perceptions and realities, and working collectively to regain control of our lives at an individual and local level, the yellow vest movement has opened some breaches in the normal course of life, redefining the horizon of possibilities and threatening the stability of the current government, if not the entire political system itself.

More than ever, as we previously emphasized, we need to pursue our efforts to "*open up spaces of autonomy, stripping legitimacy from the state and developing the capacity to meet our needs directly;*" to develop relationships based on cooperation, mutual aid, and self-determination; and to establish new anti-authoritarian and horizontal commons. No government will ever give you freedom!

## Appendix I: Tomorrow's Repression

The new Prefect of Paris has announced the law enforcement plan for March 23, 2019 in Paris. Starting at 6 am, the entire *Champs-Élysées*, as well as numerous streets near the Presidential Palace, the Concorde square, and the National Assembly will be completely locked down; every gathering in those areas is strictly forbidden.

Moreover, in the same restricted area, all kind of potential weapons, gas masks, goggles, hoods, balaclavas, and other pieces of cloth that could potentially cover a person's face are forbidden. Any person caught with one of these elements will be immediately arrested and fined for participating in an illegal gathering. Any person who is not able to prove their identity will be taken to a police station for further investigation.

All this is an indication of what the situation will be like for demonstrators in France in the future. It remains to be seen if this will crush public gatherings, or simply radicalize people further.

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## Appendix II: "The Reasons for Wrath," Raoul Vaneigem

*We include this text from the venerable Situationist to convey the enthusiasm that the yellow vest movement has inspired in veterans of earlier movements.*

**Translators' note:** This short article by former Situationist Raoul Vaneigem on the *gilets jaunes* or "yellow vests" movement was first published by *Sine Mensuel* in December 2018 under the title "Les Raisons de la colère," a play on *Les Raisins de la colère*, the French title of John Steinbeck's famous anti-capitalist novel *The Grapes of Wrath*.

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We have to wonder why it took so long for such a great number of men and women, whose existence is a daily struggle against the profit machine and the deliberate undertaking of the desertification of life and the Earth, to rise up from their lethargy and resignation.

How could we have tolerated, with such persistent silence, the arrogance of the financial powers that pull the strings of both the State and the supposed representatives of the people (that only truly represent their own selfish interests) to enforce laws and morals?

The silence was truly well-maintained. We diverted our attention toward making a great deal of noise around political quarrels, where the conflicts and coupling of the Left and the Right became exhausting, sinking into ridicule. We have even, at times surreptitiously, at times openly, incited a war of the poor against the poorest—against migrants chased by war, poverty and dictatorial regimes. It was at this moment that we realized that during this perfectly orchestrated distraction, the meat-grinder for the living had been running endlessly.

Therefore, we had to be aware of this progression of desertification, of the pollution of lands, oceans and air, of the growth of both capitalist greed and poverty which currently threaten the very survival of so many species—including our own.

The silence held by the deception of our informers is a silence full of noise and fury.

This has clarified many things. We finally understand that the real thugs are States and the financial interests that sponsor them, not the window-smashers of luxury stores that mock the

victims of consumerism and rising poverty with the same cynicism of the politicians, regardless of their party or faction.

The men and women that took the Bastille on July 14, 1789 had very little knowledge, except through vague glimpses, of the philosophy of the Enlightenment. They discovered later, without realizing it, the freedom yearning to see the light that Diderot, Rousseau, Holbach, and Voltaire espoused

This freedom was able to destroy tyranny. This deep-rooted refusal of despotisms resisted the guillotines of the Jacobins, the Thermidorians, Napoleon Bonaparte, and the restoration of the monarchy. It later resisted the rifles aimed at the Paris Commune, passing over Auschwitz and the gulags.

Certainly taking over the Élysée Palace would be giving too much credit to the grotesque paladin in power that the Order of Multinationals put in charge of doing the cops' dirty work. We should not be satisfied simply with the destruction of symbols. Burning a bank does not destroy the banking system and the dictatorship of money. Setting government buildings and the paperwork of administrative centers on fire does not abolish the State (no more than deposing its public figures and high-ranking officials).

We should never break human beings (even some cops have a bit of human conscience to save). That the yellow vests would rather choose to break the machines that charge us for everything and down excavation tools that dig the trenches of profit through our landscapes is an encouraging sign of the human progress of revolts.

Another reassuring sign: while crowds and social assemblies can be easily manipulated—as the clientelism of both the far-left and far-right suggests—we can note that, at least for the moment, the absence of leaders and appointed representatives greatly frustrates power; from which end should they catch this moving nebula? Here and there we observe that individuals, who are usually drowned out within the mass, are among themselves manifesting the creative humor, initiatives and ingenuity of human generosity (even if things can always go wrong later).

From the yellow vests movement, there emanates a joyous wrath. State authorities and capitalists would like to say it's blind. It is only searching for clarity. The blurred vision of governments is always searching for glasses.

A woman in yellow states, "I would like Macron, who lives in a palace, to explain to me how I can live on 1500 euros a month." And thus how can people tolerate budget restrictions that affect public health, non-industrial agriculture and education, that lead to the cancellation of rail lines and the destruction of landscapes to profit real estate and commercial complexes?

And the petrochemical and industrial pollution threatening the survival of the planet and its populations? Here the First Paladin responds with an ecological measure. He taxes fuel, whose costs fall on consumers. That keeps him from touching the profits of [French oil company] Total and its associates. He already showed his environmental concerns by sending 2500 cops to Notre-Dame-des-Landes to destroy community vegetable gardens, a sheep pen, self-built houses, and the experience of a new society.

And what of all those taxes and duties which, far from benefitting the average citizen, are used to bail out bank embezzlement schemes? What of the hospitals lacking medical personnel? The farmers re-naturing soil while private subsidies go to an agribusiness industry that pollutes land and water? The high school students in their factory farms where the market goes to choose its slaves?

“Proletarians of all countries,” [Belgian Surrealist and anarchist] Scutenaire once said, “I have no advice to give you.”

Quite evidently, as verified by the trend of democratic totalitarianism, all forms of government historically and presently have only worsened our bewildering inhumanity. The cult of profit cripples solidarity, generosity and hospitality. The black hole of cost effectiveness slowly absorbs the *joie de vivre* of its galaxies. Without a doubt the time has come to reconstruct the world and our everyday existence. Without a doubt the time has come to “handle our own business” against the businesses working against and disintegrating us.

Judging by the freedom of commerce that exploits and kills the living, freedom is always fragile. It would take almost nothing to reverse it and change it to its opposite. And it would take almost nothing to restore it.

Let’s take care of our own lives—they concern the life of the world.

-Raoul Vaneigem

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Yellow Vestiges: Inside the Riots of March 16  
How the Gilets Jaunes Outlasted Repression, “Dialogue,” and Co-optation  
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