

Yellow Vests for May Day

Can Macron Pacify France Before May Day 2019? Probably Not.

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Last week, concluding a national initiative aimed at drawing the general population into “dialogue” with the authorities, French President Emmanuel Macron announced a handful of minor reforms intended to placate participants in the yellow vest movement. It’s far from certain that this strategy will succeed.

The situation in France is the culmination of years of strife between protest movements and the state. At the height of the so-called “refugee crisis” in 2015, the French government used the opportunity provided by the November 13 terror attacks to declare a state of emergency intended to suppress all protest activity. Instead, a massive student revolt against the *Loi Travail* erupted in 2016, defying the state of emergency, and simmering unrest continued through the 2017 elections and the 2018 eviction of the ZAD. The clashes of May Day 2018 showed that the movement had reached an impasse: thousands of people were prepared to fight the police and engage in property destruction, but the authorities were still able to keep the contagion of rebellion quarantined inside a particular space.

Starting in November 2018, the Yellow Vest movement upended this precarious balance, drawing a much wider swathe of the population into the streets. In response, Macron organized a “National Debate” in a classic attempt at appeasement and pacification. The outcome of the National Debate and the May Day demonstrations will tell us a lot about the prospects of social movements elsewhere around the world: what forms of pressure mass movements can bring to bear on the authorities, what kind of demands neoliberal governments are (and are not) able to grant today, and what sort of longterm gains movements for revolutionary liberation can hope to make in the course of such waves of unrest.

Accordingly, in the following update, we explore the concessions Macron offered and conclude with the prospects for May Day 2019 in France.

Macron’s Intervention

Having postponed his announcement due to the fire that destroyed part of Notre-Dame cathedral on the evening of April 15, President Emmanuel Macron finally presented the results of the National Debate on Thursday, April 25, in a press conference broadcast live on French television.

The government launched this “democratic” political tool three months earlier, on January 15, 2019, to answer the thirst for a more “direct democracy” verbalized by a large part of yellow vest movement—especially through calls for a Citizens’ Initiative Referendum (RIC). Macron’s goal, of course, was to reestablish political stability in France while making as few changes as possible.

In the days preceding the press conference, several elements of his plan were leaked to the press, which diminished the *surprise effect* that the government aimed to create with this event. But unlike members of the current government, Macron’s supporters, and some corporate journalists, none of us were waiting impatiently for the president’s intervention, nor expecting that anything positive or *surprising* would come out of this political spectacle.

For more than five months now, yellow vesters have learned the hard way that dialogue with the government is meaningless—the state is prepared to take ever more authoritarian measures in order to maintain its hegemony and preserve the status quo. In the outcome of the “National Debate,” we see again why democracy has not served as a bulwark against fascism, but rather as a means to legitimize state power. Those who control the state are always careful to make sure that while elections, referendums, and discussions can serve to create the impression that the

government has a mandate to represent the general population, they never actually threaten the institutions of state power.

The Government Responds to the Yellow Vests

Those interested who wish to see two and half hours of political doublespeak can watch Macron's press conference in full. Our goal here is simply to analyze some of the major decisions taken by the French government.

In the opening statement, Macron explained that he had learned a lot from the National Debate and emerged "transformed." According to him, this three-month political experience highlighted that there is a deeply rooted feeling of fiscal, territorial, and social injustice among the population, alongside a perceived lack of consideration on the part of the elite. Therefore, the government has decided to present "a more human and fair" political project.

However, after these conventional words intended to create the illusion of empathy from the government towards yellow vesters and everyone else struggling on a daily basis as a consequence of the policies implemented by successive governments, Macron lifted the veil, adding:

"Does this mean that everything that has been done in the past two years should be stopped? I believe quite the opposite. We must continue the transformations. The orientations taken have been good and fair. The fundamentals of the first two years must be preserved, pursued, and intensified. The economic growth is greater than that of our neighboring countries."

If some people still hesitated to believe that the National Debate was just a political farce, here is the ultimate proof. For months, people expressed their frustrations in the streets and traffic circles. Facing this unprecedented and uncontrollable situation, the authorities answered by saying that in a democracy, dialogue must not be established through "violence," therefore offering the National Debate as an alternative in order to pacify the situation—while increasing police repression against demonstrators in the meantime.

After three months of National Debate—which fortunately failed to stop the movement—those who trusted the good intentions of the government saw their efforts and demands dismissed. In effect, Macron was telling everyone, "Thanks a lot for taking part of this debate, we heard you, but in the end, we decided to pursue our political agenda and continue the liberalization of the capitalist economy."

So the long-awaited conclusion of the National Debate was simply a mix of old promises, a few adjustments to show the goodwill of the government, and new reforms to accelerate the transformation and liberalization of society.

First, Macron rejected some of the biggest demands of the yellow vest movement. The government will not officially recognize "blank votes" as a form of opposition during elections (so far, those votes are counted but they are not taken into account in the final results and in the total number of vote cast). Then, he refused to reverse the decision to reduce taxes on the income of the super-rich—one of the issues that had provoked the emergence of the yellow vest movement in the first place.

Furthermore, the government also opposed the idea of creating the Citizens' Initiative Referendum (RIC). Instead, they want to develop an already existing alternative—the Referendum of

Shared Initiative—by simplifying its rules. From now on, instead of requiring 4.7 million signatures to be discussed at the *Assemblée Nationale*, a petition will only need one million signatures and the approval of at least a fifth of the total number of deputies. If the National Assembly refuses to discuss the issue, a referendum can be held. Macron also mentioned his desire to reinforce the right to petition at a local scale.

Even with the proposal to simplify this participatory political platform, it is easy to see that the government is taking very few risks with this alternative. The idea is to give people the impression that they have more leverage within the democratic system, as they can address petitions to their representatives. But in the end, who will have the final word on these issues? Politicians motivated by self-interest, power, and careerism. There is very little probability that the deputies will validate any petition that could threaten the status quo. As in any other political system, this democratic game is obviously rigged: even if you play by the rules, you always lose!

Then, Macron repeated and clarified some reforms that were already present in his electoral program of 2017: limiting the number of terms for politicians (though he did not specify how many would be allowed); reducing the number of parliamentarians by 25% or 30%; increasing the degree of proportional representation in legislative elections (which will likely give more power to the National Front in French political institutions).¹

After presenting what the government is planning to do to include more elements of participatory democracy in the French political system, Macron expressed his desire to undertake a “profound reform of the French administration” and of its public service. To do so, the government intends to put an end to the National School of Administration (ENA)—symbol of republican elitism and opportunism—in order to create a new institution that “works better.” Moreover, in May, Prime Minister Edouard Philippe has been mandated to officially present a government plan to put more civil servants in the field so they can help the authorities find solutions to people’s problems at a local scale. Therefore, the government has abandoned its previous objective of abolishing 120,000 posts of civil servants—but this doesn’t mean that the government has abandoned the idea of cutting jobs.

To fight against the steady reduction of public services in the countryside and in some provinces—such as post offices and deliveries, health insurance, and unemployment agencies—the government aims to establish buildings that would concentrate all these rudimentary public services in one location. Such initiative already exists, in fact, but is suffering from critical underfunding.

Then, Macron stated that no further hospital or school will close until 2022—the end of his presidential term—without the agreement of the Mayor of the Commune they are located in. For years, successive governments have underfunded hospitals and schools, increasing the precari-

¹ “Proportional representation” would mean that if, for example, 30% of voters vote for the Green Party, then members of that party would receive 30% of the total number of seats. So far, legislative elections offer no proportional representation—even if a party receives a large percentage of votes, it might not gain many seats at the assembly. People have been complaining about this “unfair process,” so now the government is willing to increase proportional representation in elections. Unfortunately, for several years now, the National Front has usually received around 20–25% of votes but only currently holds 6 seats out of the 577 in the *Assemblée Nationale*. Increasing proportional representation will give them more power in the decision-making—although, of course, it’s not clear to what extent Macron will actually follow through on his promises.

Of course, there is no option for people who have grown disillusioned with government itself: that perspective will never be “proportionately represented.” This is why the government refused outright to recognize blank votes.

ous aspect of working conditions. The main question is—what will happen after 2022? Regarding the education issue, Macron agreed to limit the number of students per class to 24 from kindergarten to second grade and to duplicate classes if necessary, as is already stipulated in some *priority education* areas—read poor districts. This is an interesting focus for Macron when in the meantime, government policies are worsening the educational system as a whole, especially via reforms targeting high schools and universities.

Concerning economic policies, Macron explained that he wants to “significantly reduce” the amount of income tax demanded from the middle class. However, to do so while balancing the loss of tax revenue, Macron is asking everyone to “work more.” The meaning behind this statement remains quite obscure, as Macron offered no further explanation. So far, we know that the government doesn’t want to change the legal age of retirement nor to cancel holidays. However, Macron is not opposed to the idea of increasing the number of working hours per week. The government also aims to reach its objective of “full employment” by 2025, without explaining how this might take place. In order to compensate for the tax cuts for the middle class, the government also aims to suppress some specific fiscal niches used by large companies, but Macron said nothing about the various strategies of tax evasion utilized by the super-rich.

Macron also explained his wish to increase the minimum amount of retirement pensions from today’s approximately €650 per month up to €1000. Moreover, Macron also reconsidered his previous policy regarding retirement and confirmed that pensions under €2000 would be re-indexed to account for inflation starting January 2020. Finally, the government wants to create some sort of mechanism to guarantee the payment of child support to families in need.

Starting in June, Macron wants to create a “citizen’s convention composed of one hundred and fifty people with the mission to work on significant measures for the planet.” In addition, he wants to establish a Council of Ecological Defense to address climate change. This council would involve the Prime Minister as well as the main Ministers in charge of this transition in order to take “strategic choices and to put this climate change at the very core of our policies.” This is not a measure to address the ecological crisis so much as yet another step in the development of the same French bureaucracy that sparked the yellow vest movement in the first place. Our governments and the systems that put them in power in the first place continue to lead us towards darker futures.

Finally, and most ominously, Macron presented his plan to “rebuild the immigration policy” of France. “Europe needs to rethink its cooperation with Africa in order to limit the endured immigration and has to reinforce its borders, even if this means having a Schengen area with less countries,” he proclaimed. “I deeply believe in asylum, but we must strengthen the fight against those who abuse it.” This will likely be the premise of a new step in the development of fortress Europe. And, of course, whatever authoritarian measures are developed to target migrants will also be used to target poor people and rebellious elements within France itself. In this regard, we can see that it has been self-destructive as well as racist and xenophobic that some yellow vesters have demanded more immigration controls.

As May Day Approaches

Following this press conference, the government hoped that its official announcements would finally take the life out of the yellow vest movement, defusing the social tension that has built

up. However, in the hours following Macron's speech, several well-known yellow vest figures expressed their dissatisfaction with his proposals, calling for further demonstrations. In the end, even if some yellow vesters were sidetracked by Macron's announcement, it was difficult to predict whether people would massively take the streets for the 24th act of the yellow vest movement.

On Saturday, April 27, about 23,600 yellow vesters demonstrated in France. For this new day of action, the epicenter of the movement was the city of Strasbourg. As the European elections will occur in a month, an "international call" was made to gather and march towards the European Parliament. Some Belgians, Germans, Italians, Swiss, and Luxembourgers participated as well. About 3000 demonstrators walked through the streets of Strasbourg, confronting police and engaging in property destruction. In the end, 42 people were arrested and at least 7 injured—three police officers, three demonstrators, and one passerby.

At the same time, two demonstrations took place in Paris. The first, organized by trade unions, drew about 5500 demonstrators, among them 2000 in yellow vests, while the other, mostly composed of several hundreds of yellow vesters, did a tour of all the major corporate media headquarters to ask for "impartial media coverage." Other gatherings also took place in Lyons, Toulouse, Cambrai, and elsewhere in France. (All of the figures provided here are from the French authorities.)

If we compare the total number of participants in this 24th act to the other national days of action, it is undeniable that it attracted fewer participants. Does that mean that the government has finally gained the upper hand over the movement? It's unclear. It is possible that some yellow vesters stayed home from the 24th act in order to prepare for May Day.

Last year, the intensity of property destruction and confrontations with police during the May Day mobilization of anarchists and other autonomous rebels compelled the government to cancel the entire traditional trade union march. In view of the tense social and political situation in France today, who knows what May Day 2019 could bring?

If the government attempts to cancel or repress demonstrations in Paris this May Day, the situation could become explosive. Not only because the police have adopted aggressive new law enforcement strategies over the past few weeks, but also because several calls have been made for yellow vesters to join autonomous rebels at the front of the traditional Parisian afternoon procession for the "ultimate act." The objective is set: Paris is to become the capital city of rioting.

Here is an English adaptation of one of the calls, entitled *Pour un 1er mai jaune et noir*:

For a yellow and black May Day!

"When the government violates the rights of the people, insurrection is for the people and for each portion of the people the most sacred of rights and the most indispensable of duties."

-Article 35 of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen (1793)

Macron's government has decided to crush the current social protest by force, reaching a level of repression never seen before: prohibitions of demonstrations, deployment of soldiers, the use of armored vehicles, the use of chemical markers and weapons of war against protesters, jail sentences in spades, hands torn off, blinded protesters...

During the demonstration of May Day 2018, the Prefecture of Police counted 14,500 demonstrators "on the sidelines of the trade union procession" (almost as much as

in the traditional procession) including 1200 “radical individuals.” On March 16, at the time of act 18, it was 1500 “ultra violent” ones who were present among the 7000 demonstrators, according to the figures of this same police.

Today, what frightens the state is not the rioters themselves, but the adhesion and understanding they arouse among the rest of the population. And this despite the calls, week after week, for everyone to dissociate themselves from the “breakers.”

If there is one group that currently strikes France with all its violence, it is not the “Black Bloc,” nor the yellow vests; it is rather the government itself.

We are calling on all revolutionaries in France and elsewhere, all those who want this to change, to come and form a determined and combative march. Because if repression falls on everyone, our response must be common and united. Against Macron and his world, let’s take the street together to revive the convergence of anger and hope. Let’s get ready, let’s equip ourselves, let’s organize ourselves to overthrow him and drag him through a day in hell.

War has been declared!

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