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Lessons from the Yellow Vests

Melbourne Anarchist Communist Group

30 January 2019

The Yellow Vests movement in France began on 17 November and, after peaking in early December, has continued to this day. It was triggered by the decision of the French Government to increase taxes on petrol and diesel fuel at the start of 2019 and to justify it on environmental grounds, in particular to mitigate climate change. Opinion polls report that the movement has the support of the vast majority of people in France.

Hundreds of thousands of people have participated in militant actions across France, with many of the demonstrations encountering massive police violence. The movement has been politically heterogeneous from the outset. At the beginning Right wing tendencies were predominant, but after about a month, the Left gained the upper hand. At all times, the movement has resisted the appeal to affiliate itself with any of the mainstream French political parties. The Government abandoned the fuel tax increases, but the movement had already transformed into one protesting against the Government's economic policies generally.

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It is unclear what the eventual result of the Yellow Vests movement will be, but one thing is already clear. The Government's attempt to use price signals in the capitalist market to bring about a transition from fossil fuels has been killed off. The people of France, emphatically and almost unanimously, have rejected the neo-liberal prescription for addressing climate change. The climate movement around the world ignores this lesson at its peril.

The world needs to stop climate change. Left unchecked, global temperatures will rise by between 40 and 70 Celsius. This would result in the destruction of most ecosystems, render large parts of the world uninhabitable due to summer heat and kill billions of people. This is not just about the Great Barrier Reef or the Amazon jungle, important as they are. This is about the survival of industrial civilisation and, in a worst case scenario, the human race itself.

Action to mitigate climate change, however, does not occur in a vacuum. The same capitalist system which brought us unsustainable fossil fuels also created a vastly unequal society, and inequality continues to increase. When a government uses neo-liberal policies like a carbon price to address climate change, it aggravates the tendency in capitalism to produce inequality. Just as for electricity prices, when fuel prices rise, workers suffer and the capitalists hardly notice.

For us in Australia, the consequences should be clear. The media are dominated by hard Right wing climate denialist voices. They will channel justified working class anger against declining living standards into a deadly weapon against any form of carbon pricing. The Right will promote mass scepticism about the scientific basis for taking action against climate change. This is precisely what occurred to the Labor Government of Julia Gillard in 2010 and the consequences are likely to be the same – or worse – if that strategy is repeated.

The only realistic approach to climate change is one that recognises the inequality in our society. The policies of neo-

liberalism, in particular carbon pricing, are a prescription for failure. Workers and communities currently reliant on unsustainable industries deserve a just transition. Working class living standards as a whole must be protected to maintain social support for a transition to a carbon free economy. The price of the transition must be borne by those who built and profited from unsustainable industries – the capitalists. In short, we need to abolish capitalism. It is the only strategy that can work.

A JUST TRANSITION MEANS ABOLISHING CAPITALISM