

France: Trade Unions, Social Movements and the Yellow Vests

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With the neoliberal reforms that Macron has rapidly implemented, social dialogue between social movements, unions and the government has become more difficult and fragmented. The French trade union movement is split along political lines into several umbrella organizations, and the level of organization has stagnated. The yellow vests have not been able to decisively change Macron's course. But they have rearticulated positions critical of capitalism and class struggle, also taking migrant struggles into the equation.



The French Union Movement

The more social-democratic and consensus-oriented federations French Democratic Trade Union Confederation CFDT and the General Confederation of Labor Power CGT-FO, accept deregulation if internal structures are reinforced. The CGT, formerly closely linked to the Communist Party, relies on mobilization in the streets. It has a class-struggle orientation and wants to work from the workplaces into society. The CFDT, which tends to organize employees, has replaced the CGT as the strongest union in workplace council elections since

2017. This is predominantly due to structural change (from production in large factories to service industries). The level of unionization has stagnated at just 11%.

Elected president in 2017 and 2022, Emmanuel Macron and his LREM (The Republic on the Move!) party reject the previously usual social dialogue and state-mediated concertation between business associations and unions.

Macron has all reform projects passed in the shortest possible time to quickly create facts.



In 2018, all sectors of society, but especially unions and students, protested Macron's reforms, such as billions in tax cuts for large French companies, over 100,000 job cuts in the public sector, the transfer of the state railroad SNCF to a private company, the tightening of asylum laws, and a reorganization of university admissions.

For weeks there were strikes at the SNCF, dozens of universities were occupied. On May 5 of 2018, more than 130,000 people demonstrated in Paris. However, the neoliberal reforms could not be stopped.



Im November 2018 entstand überraschend die Bewegung der Gelbwesten. Der Auslöser mag die Ablehnung einer Steuer gewesen sein, die den Dieselpreis erhöht hätte, die Forderungen der Gelbwesten gingen schnell weit darüber hinaus. Unorganisierte rechte Akteure hatten die Aktionen in den sozialen Medien mit angestoßen, doch unter den Gelbwesten dominierte die Sorge vor dem Abbau staatlicher Infrastruktur, Armutsrenten und einer ungerechten Besteuerung großer Vermögen.

Rassistische Töne spielten keine Rolle; vielmehr wuchs mit der Zeit die Solidarität mit den Menschen der migrantischen Vorstädte. Dort begegnen Staat und Polizei Protesten gegen Ausgrenzung und Armut seit Jahrzehnten mit Gewalt. Von dieser Konstellation sahen sich die Gelbwesten selbst betroffen.

What could be achieved?

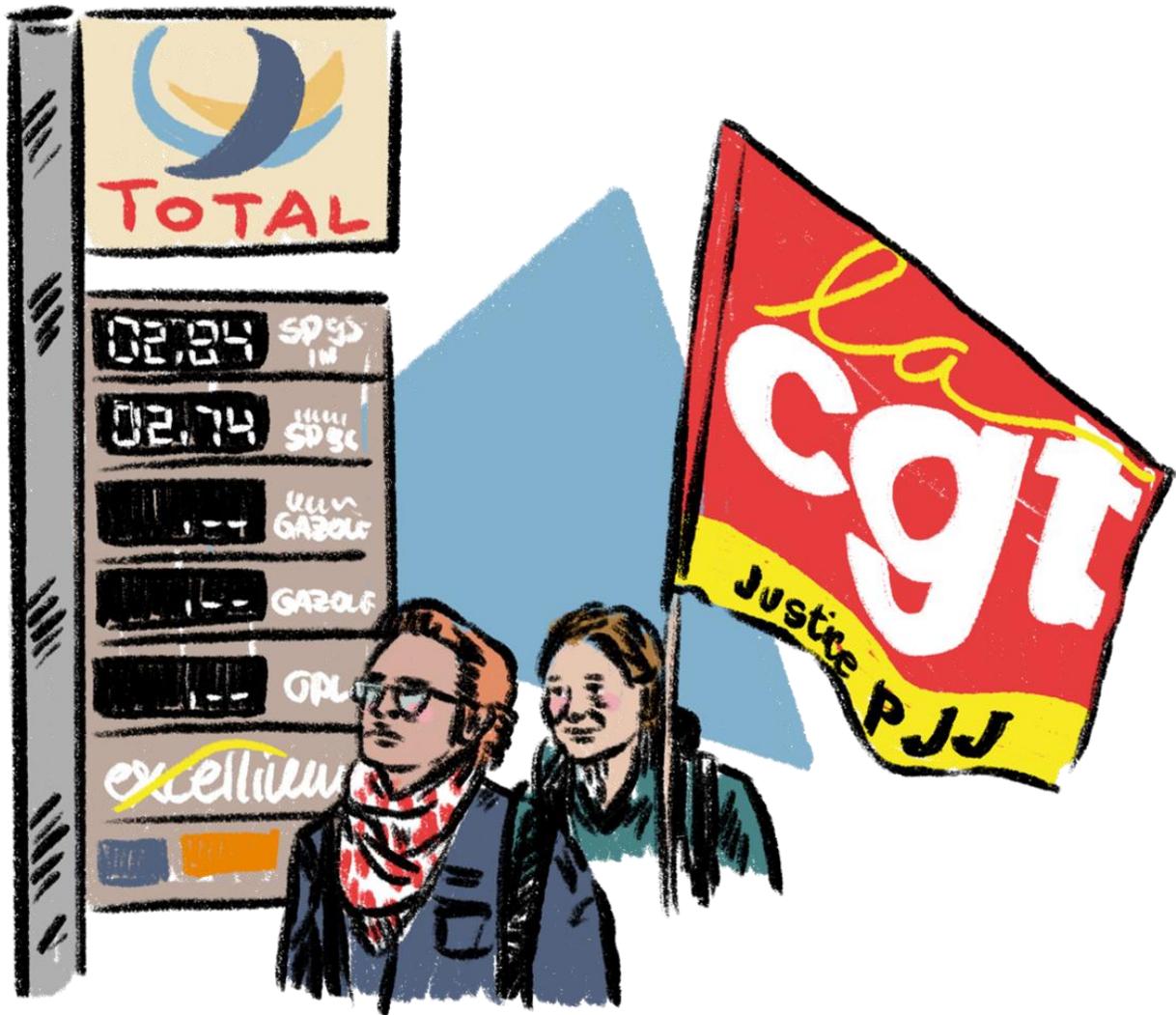
The yellow vests could not decisively change Macron's course. But they have rearticulated positions critical of capitalism and rooted in the class struggle, also integrating migrant struggles in the whole.

Police violence is now also addressed socially, linked to a structural analysis of the hierarchical, male-dominated and racist basic consensus within the police.



The harsh lockdown during the Covid 19 pandemic prevented protests for months, but afterwards the yellow vests were present again. Large protests for a strengthening of the public health system followed.

In May 2020, all progressive social organizations and the CGT issued a call for a social-ecological awakening. The pressure of the movements also led to the convergence of the left parties among themselves.



Left-wing alliance lists achieved major successes in the local elections of March and June of 2021. In April 2022, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, as the candidate of the Socialist party Rebellious France (LFI), missed the ballot for the presidency by a narrow margin with 21.95% of the votes.