

France: The “hi-viz” movement

A translation of a report from A.V. in Marseille. Published on lernenimkamp website in 23 November 2018

The “hi-viz” movement started with motorists protesting against the increase in fuel prices following an increase in the tax on diesel fuel.

For years diesel fuel prices in France have been low, and this led many people to buy diesel vehicles. Now the taxes on diesel fuel are going up. Calls for road blocks started on Facebook and other social networks. These began on Saturday 17 November. According to government sources, 280,000 people gathered together at 2,000 different locations on that day, blocking roads, demonstrating and occupying motorways. The road blocks have persisted since then.

Although parties like La France Insoumise or the far-right Rassemblement Nationale support this movement in the media, they do not officially contribute to it. What you hear on the roadblocks is above all peoples’ fury at Macron and his government. For years, and in particular since Macron came to power, living conditions for the majority of French people have been getting worse. He has cut taxes affecting the rich (what the French call “ISF”), raised the tax burden on pensioners and civil servants (“CSG”), cut housing benefit and at the same time introduced an annual cut of 40 bn euro on business (“CICE”). Inflation is rising more strongly and wages are stagnating, so real wages are falling. And now motorists, particularly in medium-sized towns, have to pay more for fuel, although they have no alternative way of getting around at a time when we are all told labour has to more mobile. The overwhelming majority of people know that they are not paying this tax to protect the environment, and that in the framework of the reform of the state railways more and more routes are

being closed. The entire French tax system is unfair. In comparison with what they earn, French workers pay a lot more than the rich, the shareholders, the bourgeoisie. A few weeks ago Macron told an unemployed person he only needed to cross the road to find a job. Today thousands of French people are not just crossing the road, they are blocking it shouting "Macron demission!" – "Macron resign!" With his pro-rich policies and his arrogance (he recently told a pensioner to quit complaining), Macron has lined up over 70% of French people – basically the whole working class – against him. To add fuel to the flames, the security service, who mostly had no idea on 17 November where the road-blocks and demonstrations were going to happen, have reacted very hesitantly. But since last Monday things have changed. Since Saturday thousands of workers, tradespeople and -noticeably – lots of women have been blocking France's roads. The movement is strongest in the medium-sized towns. However, on 17 November there were also actions in Paris, where over 1,000 demonstrators nearly got through to their stated target in front of the Elysee Palace (Macron's Official residence). Now the government is trying to criminalise the movement, portraying the demonstrators as wreckers. Even if the movement has ebbed a little, it remains popular. And it has a new goal: the 24 November demo in Paris.

The demonstrators want Macron to resign and they know that power lies in the Elysee Palace.

Apart from the road transport industry sector of the (moderate socialist) Force Ouvriere union, who yesterday called for support for the movement, the "hi-viz" movement has not yet been supported by the big union confederations. The (traditionally Communist-led) CGT confederation calls for support for a demonstration they have already planned for 1 December. It is left to the bourgeois press to speculate about the movement's far-right potential. A lot of people are wondering why the trade unions are hesitating about joining

the movement. The same is true of France Insoumise, which has not so far got involved in the struggle as an organisation. The well-known France Insoumise parliamentary deputy, Francois Ruffin, stated on the evening of 21 November on TV that France Insoumise is not calling for Macron's resignation, but that if he continued to defend only the interests of big business he would have to go. This lack of determination and political clarity help the government. Francois Ruffin demands a reduction in the fuel tax, more tax justice and the reintroduction of the wealth tax. That is right. These are also demands which the unions could bring into the movement.

Basically, the question of power is raised. So far neither France Insoumise nor the union leaders have contributed to bringing the government down. On 24 November the "hi-viz" are planning to head for Paris in numbers to force the government to listen to them. We can assume that these workers and intermediate layers who are not organised in unions will try to head for the Elysee Palace. They are right to do so. Today trade unions can establish a clear platform of demands and offer support in organising this demonstration.