

We will not be the State's guard dogs! Statement of Solidarity for the Yellow Vests

by Various Academics, Intellectuals and Artists¹

Who would have thought that a jacket could shake up the State?

For the last two months, we have witnessed a popular movement of great size that is supported by a large number of French people. This movement has taken the yellow vest as its symbol – the life jacket that signals danger has become a rallying cry against on-going social cuts: “You will not crush us!” It renders visible those who would ordinarily remain invisible. By peacefully occupying traffic circles, the Yellow Vests have, in their way, been inspired by the occupations of the factories in June 1936 and May 1968, and by more recent protest movements, such as the Arab Spring, the anti-austerity movement in Spain,² and *Occupy*³ in the USA.

The movement of the Yellow Vests has shown once again that, when confronted with a power that is desperate to impose its “reforms,” only struggle can be successful as a counter-measure: one must occupy, blockade, demonstrate at and impact the sensitive locations of the State, the economy and finance. One must build relationships, invent forms of solidarity, organize and unite those who are angry, seek out convergences, create new forms of resistance and think of new ways of being involved in politics.

Confronted with this movement, the State has chosen repression by the cops and the justice system. It contemplates creating records of the demonstrators so as to have the ability to engage in preventive detentions. Even though the weapons employed by the police have already caused injuries (some of them serious) to dozens of people, new orders of “extreme firmness” have been given to the police and prosecutors. To justify this policy of brutal confrontation, the authorities are attempting to use every means possible to discredit the Yellow Vests. And so, Emmanuel Macron has stigmatized them as a “hate-filled mob” that is simultaneously xenophobic, homophobic and anti-Semitic. . . . The State can count on the complicity of certain media outlets that seize upon the smallest incident to

¹ “Nous ne serons pas les chiens de garde de l'État!” published by *Mediapart* on 12 January 2019: <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/edition/les-invites-de-mediapart/article/120119/nous-ne-serons-pas-les-chiens-de-garde-de-letat> Translated by NOT BORED! 13 January 2019. All footnotes by the translator.

² *les Indignés espagnols*. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-austerity_movement_in_Spain.

³ English in original.

present the Yellow Vests as racists and fascists. The State can also count on its guard dogs, the media intellectuals⁴ who have hastened to denounce them as “barbarians” and “brown jackets.”⁵ One of them has even congratulated the police for having “saved the Republic”!

Many academics, intellectuals (teachers, researchers, etc.) and artists – including those whose sympathies are for the Left or the far-Left – have kept a prudent silence until now. No doubt because this movement doesn’t fit into the usual categories of political judgment; it has been unforeseeable, unclassifiable, like May 68 was at the time, like any historic event worthy of the name. Some have come out in favor of this popular movement, but the dominant media have ignored their words. It is this silence that we want to break by affirming our solidarity with the Yellow Vests publicly and by calling on intellectuals, academic and artists to join them.

It is certainly a heterogeneous movement, traversed by multiple contradictions, and the target of attempted infiltration and cooptation by the far Right. It is important to remain vigilant in the face of any conspiratorial, racist or homophobic downward slide. But these tirades [*dérapages*] are the deeds of a small minority and cannot in any case serve as a pretext for discrediting the Yellow Vest movement as a whole. While unreservedly condemning the death threats made against elected officials and the Yellow Vests who have been accused of “treason,” we contest the undifferentiated usage of the term *violence*, which mixes together physical acts of violence against people, which are unacceptable, and the damaging of property (burnt cars, broken windows and forced-open government doors) that always accompanies popular uprisings. Without forgetting what Brecht said: “They say that an overflowing river is violent / But they never say anything about the violence / Of the banks that surround it.”⁶

The Yellow Vest movement was born from demands for equality and justice, from protests against the destruction of the “French social model” and the increasing [economic] insecurity of large segments of the population, accelerated by the neo-liberal reforms made rapidly and without public discussion by Emmanuel Macron. This movement testifies to a demand for recognition, to the will to be heard and respected, despite and because of the scornful arrogance of a government of technocrats who think they are “too intelligent and too subtle” to be understood by “illiterate” people, by people “who are worthless.”

⁴ Bernard-Henri Lévy, for example. See <https://francais.rt.com/france/56359-gilets-jaunes-bruns-contre-montee-des-fachos-bhl-lance-hashtag-soutienaupresidentmacron>.

⁵ An echo of Nazi “brown shirts.”

⁶ Bertolt Brecht, “*Über die Gewalt*,” circa 1934-1941.

Beginning with an anti-fiscal revolt, the Yellow Vest movement has experienced a rapid politicization that has taken place outside all the political parties. We have seen the emergence of radical demands that concern society's institutions and the exercise of power. By referring to the historic traditions of the French Revolution (lists of grievances, appeals to the General Estates, "women's marches"), the Yellow Vests have reawakened the idea of active citizenship founded on the authority [*la compétence*] of the People. One would commit a grave error by condemning their demands for a "citizens' initiative referendum" or the call of the Yellow Vests in Commercy to create "popular committees" of citizens and to federate them in an "assembly of assemblies" as "populist" or reactionary.

The requirement of the direct expression of popular will and the demand for the control and supervision of elected representatives by the voters, who subject those representatives to a revocable and imperative mandate: all this belongs to the democratic and revolutionary tradition that stretches from the *Sans-Culottes* [of 1792], the Revolution of 1848 and the Communards to the Workers' Councils of the 20th century. The refusal of any delegation of power that characterizes the [ideas of the] majority of Yellow Vests is inscribed in this same tradition, which is that of radical and libertarian democracy, rekindled by the memory of betrayed revolts.

Today, the Yellow Vest movement is at a crossroads. Even if it must not be overestimated, the risk exists that the far Right will impose its authoritarian, hateful and xenophobic orientation on it. It is the historic responsibility of the Left to not leave the field open to such an imposition.

For all these reasons, we call upon the academics, the intellectuals and the artists who are loyal to the ideals of emancipation to actively support the Yellow Vests, to relay their demands and to join them in the struggle.⁷

⁷ To see the original 250 signatories to this statement and/or to sign it: <https://www.change.org/p/le-peuple-solidarité-des-universitaires-des-intellectuels-et-des-artistes-avec-les-gilets-jaunes>.