

The “Yellow Vests” Movement as a Consequence of Disturbed Social Dialogue in France

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The importance of a proper and equal social dialogue was shown in its true measure after the great political crisis that struck France at the end of 2018, embodied in the “Yellow Vests” movement. This was a strong manifestation of the forgotten France whose role in social decision-making was neglected both by the authorities and by the trade unions. Its strength and massiveness, as well as the support of a large part of the rest of the population, forced the government to seek solutions rapidly to renew social dialogue and channel the energy of the “Yellow Vests” into the constructive social debate. Starting from the demands of this movement, significant social reforms have been undertaken which, at least for a while, assured social peace but with a continuous risk of new escalations.

Keywords: trade unions, Yellow Vests, social dialogue, France

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Introduction

At the end of 2018, France was hit by the “Yellow Wave,” which soon took on dramatic proportions, threatening to “wipe out” existing political institutions and to expand beyond national borders. It happened in the wake of the ubiquitous dissatisfaction of the population, affected by weak economic growth, high polarization in the labor market and in society, and insufficiently engaged social dialogue. After several years of the constant danger of terrorist attacks, radical Islamism, and the trauma they caused, as the immediate danger was removed and further Islamization brought under relative control, other, burning issues and widespread dissatisfaction of the French population came out to light.

The “Yellow Vests” movement is an indicator of the general crisis of the political and economic situation in France, which could intensify in the future if the government, political

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parties and trade unions fail to mobilize and channel the masses. “Yellow vests” are the bearers of popular culture, which opposes specialized political forms, related to the superior strata of society and away from the base. With their appearance, the increasing plutocracy in France was slapped and forced to turn to a more active and equal social dialogue.

The aim of this work is to try to prove that compromised social dialogue is one of the elements that led to a gap in society and ultimately to a social explosion that France has not had since 1968. In this regard, the initial assumption is that the “Yellow Vests” movement emerged as a consequence of the weakened social dialogue in France due to:

- a) declining living standards and a weakened middle class;
- b) new job structures and changes in the labor market;
- c) real inequalities and its subjective perceptions among the population;
- d) obsolescence and maladaptation of trade unions and their weakened position in relation to patronage and the state;
- e) skipping classical democratic procedures by the executive.

Conceptual definition of social dialogue

According to the broad definition given by the International Labor Organization, social dialogue encompasses all forms of negotiation, consultation, or exchange of information between workers’, employers’ and governments’ representatives on the issues of common interest relating to economic and social policy. It can take place at all levels (at the level of companies, sectors, regional, national, and supranational level) and take the form of a dialogue between employers’ organizations and trade unions, as bipartite, or with the involvement of public authorities as a third party – tripartite dialogue (Grečić, 2014). Social dialogue in France is based on the standards and recommendations set by the International Labour Organization and involves negotiations or consultations between social actors (representatives of employees, employers, public authorities) on economic and social issues of common interest.

One of the main actors in the tripartite dialogue is the trade union, whose role is to protect the economic and professional rights and interests of employees in negotiations with patronage and the state. The specificity of France, however, is that its unionization rate is extremely low, compared to other European Union and OECD countries. The highest rate of unionization existed immediately after World War II, 30%, before falling to 17% in the 1950s, rising slightly in the 1970s, then falling again to only 10% in the early 1990s, after which the rate stabilized at 11%. The differences in the unionization rate are large in relation to the sector of activity and the type of company. In the private sector, this level is 8.4%, while in the public sector, it is 19.1%. In companies with less than 50 employees, this percentage is only 5%, and even lower in small companies (Dares, 2016).¹

New Job Structures and Changes in the Labor Market

What significantly affects low unionization is the new business structure. The weakening of large industrial companies, as traditional bastions of trade unionism, has led to a decline in membership. Industrial activity has been replaced by service activities, which include great diversity, small business units, geographical dispersion, frequent job changes and the disconnection between employees. Persistent mass unemployment and job insecurity and

¹ Directorate of the French Ministry of Labour, which conducts analyzes, studies and statistics on the topics of work, employment, professional development and social dialogue.

atypicality have made it even more difficult to join a union. According to the Ministry of Labor, 3% of fixed-time employees and only 1% of part-time employees are unionized. Finally, the division and high politicization of unions – which is characteristic of France – limits their capacity for action and ability to adapt to new labor market conditions, and especially to attract the younger generation. Only 3.3% of those under 30 are unionized, compared to 15% of those aged 50 and over (Dares, 2016).

The crisis of trade unionism is also the result of globalization and digitalization, which have caused dramatic changes in the labor market. These transformations, which began in the eighties and have accelerated since 2007, led companies to seek more flexibility in employment and cost reductions in order to increase competitiveness, putting great pressure on employees, especially with mass job losses due to shifting production to Asian countries.

Poverty, Inequalities and Their Perception in France

According to Insee (the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies) (Insee, 2018), in 2015, the level of poverty and inequality in France was one of the lowest in Europe – 14.2%, representing 8.9 million people.

Despite the average level of poverty that remains stable and even lower than in most other countries, what actually affects the population is the decline of the middle class, as an increasing number of people can no longer afford the standard of living they had. Although realistically, the poverty rate is stable, the impression of the vast majority is that it is on the rise. Concerns about the future are high, with 88% of the population thinking that poverty will increase in the next five years. Nearly 40% of the population is considered poor or at risk of becoming so. Poverty does not literally mean misery, but the loss of the ability to maintain the same way of life.

Who are the “Yellow Vests”?

The “Yellow Vests” movement began as a protest against the increase in the tax on carbon emissions, which significantly affected the price of fuel. After this issue, which was “the straw,” many others were raised as an indicator of inequality and declining quality of life for the part of the population around and below the median: general tax overload, low purchasing power, fiscal evasion of the richest strata, lack of honest social dialogue, unemployment, weakening of social services, desertification of regions far from the centers and others.

According to the conducted polls, the “Yellow Vests” movement appears, for the most part, to be non-partisan. Namely, 60% of the respondents do not belong to any political party, and they do not identify themselves as either left or right. Although they did not channel their political orientations into the existing political frameworks, they are far from apolitical, and they demonstrated this boisterously through manifestations, blocking intersections, boycotts. They have united and organized in a new way – through social networks, bypassing institutionalized frameworks, and thus, in a sense, they show greater modernism than the official political-party representatives do. A large part of them do not vote, and those who do are mostly turned to extreme political propositions.

The “Yellow Vests” are a heterogeneous group, composed of the lower and middle strata of society living in rural and urban areas, people without higher degrees – the working population, affected by poverty. According to a survey conducted by a group of sociologists,

political scientists, and geographers, first published in *Le Monde* magazine on December 11, 2018 (Bedock et al., 2018), “Yellow Vests” are on average 45 years old, belong to lower social classes, or the lower middle class. Clerks are the most represented: 33% of the total number of participants, while otherwise, they represent 27% of the active French population. Workers are represented with only 14% in “Yellow Vests.” Craftsmen, small traders and managers of small businesses are also well represented: 10.5% of the total, while they make up 6.5% of the total French active population. Superior staff members are poorly represented: barely 5% of the total number of participants, while they make up 18% of the active population at the national level. Participants who are not working make up a quarter of the total number of participants and are mostly pensioners.

Of significant interest is the large proportion of women, most often from the lower strata of society and not usually politically active. Then, 25% of participants have more than high school diplomas, while 35% have basic professional diplomas. Nearly a third live in households below the median level, with incomes a third below average; 33% of participants state that they are apolitical, 15% define themselves on the extreme left of the political spectrum, 5.4% on the extreme right, 42.6% on the left and 12.7% on the right.

The “Yellow Vests” voted in small numbers for the current president of France (since May 14, 2017), Emmanuel Macron, in the first round of the presidential elections. 36% voted for the ultra-right, and 28% for the ultra-left. Only 5% voted for Macron. For almost half of the participants, this was their first mobilization.

In addition to demands for improved purchasing power and living standards, which should include leisure, which are less and less available, in addition to pointing to fiscal injustice, “Yellow Vests” demand respect and recognition by political authorities. Based on that, in an article in the magazine *L’Humanité*, anthropologist Bernard Kalaora repeats the term “echo,” taken from sociologist Rosa Hartmut (Hartmut, 2018). The goal of the movement is to recognize its demands, but it is also a way for its participants to feel connected to others, to show their power to start things from the deadlock and to act on the world.

In the public debate that followed, the incoherence of the demands of the “Yellow Vests” was emphasized. It was pointed out that they wanted more purchasing power, improved public services, but reduced tax burden. The movement, which arose spontaneously, without elected or proclaimed leaders, was required to appoint its representatives in the social dialogue and to formulate its demands clearly. In essence, the “Yellow Vests” are a manifestation of the revolt of the “forgotten” France, small people unaccustomed to public appearances, but determined to express themselves and remind others that they also have some say in determining the political course. The fact that classical democratic means were not used for that purpose, shows, inter alia, the weakness, unrepresentativeness and obsolescence of trade unions in France and significant changes in the labor market.

The following reasons for the union’s incompatibility with the “Yellow Vests” movement could be cited:

1. The spontaneous character of the “Yellow Vests” movement, the rejection of intermediaries and any institutions are contrary to the basic tenets of trade unionism. Trade unions are representative bodies, with a certain way of working. “Yellow vests” are spontaneous, direct, composed of individuals or groups of individuals that underline their mutual independence, as well as independence from unions or political parties. They demand direct democracy, characteristic of populism. By skipping the steps of representative democracy, they call for a “referendum at the

- initiative of citizens,” which carries the risk of irrational, emotional decisions and the collapse of the existing social system, of which unions form a fixed part.
2. Trade unions and “Yellow Vests” are two worlds that do not intertwine in everyday life and which have difficulty in understanding each other. Many of the “Yellow Vests” work in small businesses and in sectors where unions are not present. There are also many self-employed entrepreneurs and artisans who are not affiliated with unions, as well as a significant percentage of women affected by poverty due to difficult professional and/or private situations, a population that unions find difficult to connect and place under their protection.
 3. These groups generally have a bad opinion of trade unionism, whose activity they do not notice and which they consider too institutionalized and far from the base. As for the union, they expressed indignation towards people who never show up in the company to defend their rights, and who suddenly wake up and ask the state directly to resolve the issue of purchasing power, which should first be resolved within the company.
 4. The demands of the “Yellow Vests” for tax cuts are in contradiction to the views and interests of trade unions, who are defending public services and social protection, financed from taxes and social contributions – the basis of the French welfare state.
 5. Non-compliance with the rules for organizing events by the “Yellow Vests” often led to violence and violent police intervention. The unions distanced themselves and condemned all the numerous acts of violence, verbal and physical, as contrary to their practice and the basic republican principles that promote the protection of persons and property.

The “Yellow Vests” have shown that unions need to renew contact with a significant number of employees they never meet, or only rarely. The message, conveyed through the movement, testifies to the drastic fracture of French society and the difficulties of the population affected by social and territorial inequalities. The set demands must be answered through an active, engaged and honest social dialogue of all actors of tripartite cooperation. The role of trade unions in the fight against inequality must be strengthened within and outside the company, through closer contact with the working and other population, more time and more resources need to be invested in dialogue with workers.

Government Interventionism and Circumvention of Parliament Using Ordinances

Former banker of the highly selective Rothschild bank, the youngest French president of all time, elected after the meteoric rise and quasi-disappearance of France’s two most important political parties, Emanuel Macron has a reputation as the president of the rich, especially since he abolished the tax on wealth (in French: ISF – Impôt sur la fortune). The young and ambitious president, in line with the name of his political party “En marche” (on the move), immediately began his term with labor law reforms, announced during his presidential campaign. The reforms of the labor law, as well as the later reform of the French railways, were carried out through government decrees, without debates and votes in the French Parliament. In order to justify bypassing the parliament, the government in both cases invoked the urgency of the reforms imposed by the European Union calendar.

Although this practice has not been rare in the past and is in line with the provisions of the French Constitution, such actions have aroused a feeling in the population that the president and the government are acting arbitrarily, not respecting social dialogue. In the absence of an institutionalized, tripartite social dialogue, the need to establish it has imposed other means.

Social Dialogue by Other Means

The “Yellow Vests” movement arose spontaneously. The beginnings of the organization were on social networks, which soon led to a strong social movement that shook France in late 2018 and early 2019, forcing the government, hitherto assessed as autocratic and “autistic,” to resume social dialogue and introduce measures, soon afterwards legalized, in order to respond to the urgent socio-economic situation in the country.

The French welfare state, shaken by the effects of globalization and the economic crisis, has managed to maintain its social model and curb the rise of poverty and inequality, thanks to taxes and social transfers, which are among the highest in Europe and the world. The tax burden has grown since 2008, the year of the crisis, to reach 46.2% of the gross domestic product in 2017, while the average for OECD countries was 34.2%. (OECD, 2019). This increase particularly affected the middle class, whose mass dissatisfaction with the decline in purchasing power crystallized in the “Yellow Vests” movement. The government was warned by the National Commission for Public Debate (CNDP) about the unacceptability of the increase in the carbon tax, which was assessed as penalizing those who depend primarily on fossil fuels, but the warning was deafened. Driven by the spirit of neoliberal capitalism, obligations to the European Union and a large budget deficit, the government ignored the growing dissatisfaction of the population and announced the introduction of this tax, which was the trigger for the biggest social unrest in France since May 1968.

An annual study by the OpinionWay Center for the Study of Political Life, published in *Le Figaro* on January 11, 2019, showed that the French had never expressed such distrust in its institutions and actors of democratic life since 2009, when this kind of research began. The President of the Republic – his office and he personally, were historically poorly rated: only 28% of the population trusted him, while 33% of the population trusted the Prime Minister. The score for unions was only 30%, for banks 28%, for the media 25%, and for political parties 12%. Despite distrust of political representatives and institutions, the population’s commitment to democracy was at a very high level: 83% of respondents thought that democracy was better than any other way of governing, and 61% considered voting as the best way of expression for citizens.

Historian Gerard Noiriel (Noiriel, 2019), an expert on the history of immigration and the labor movement, believes that the movement and the goals of the “Yellow Vests” came from the petty bourgeoisie, and not from factory workers. According to his analysis of the movement in *Libération* magazine, what is new is the emergence of a large number of heterogeneous groups, dispersed in different geographical areas, with a great diversity of profiles, origins and requirements. According to him, that is a lesson addressed to the unions, which have failed to connect and organize this diversity. The labor movement has done much to discipline social struggles, but with the crisis of union representation, in parallel with the strong influence of the media and social networks, its role in channeling social forces has been relegated to the background, bringing us back to direct democracy movement. Noarel believes that the common point between the “Yellow Vests” and Macron’s election as president is the use of

social networks, and that the anger of the population is strongly focused on Macron because the lower social strata are completely forgotten in his political program: “It is not contempt, it is the blindness of the class. He is a representative of the top administration officials, who passed directly from the Rothschild Bank to the Ministry of Economy, and then to the Elysee Palace, with the conviction that the country will get out of trouble thanks to start-ups, managers and new technologies. The gap with the lower classes is widened by the fact that he did not have any experience as an elected politician before his election as president, as is the case with a large number of representatives from his party. That is why the tax on fuel turned into an explosion of rage, with the personification of things” (Schwartzbrod, 2018).

Since December 2018, the establishment of a referendum at the initiative of citizens appears to be one of the main demands of the movement. Despite the announcement of significant measures to improve the socio-economic situation in the country (increase of the minimum personal income, annulment of the announced carbon tax, defiscalization of overtime hours, etc.), which were institutionalized in the Law of December 24th, 2018, the “Yellow Vests” request for the establishment of direct democracy – that is, a referendum at the initiative of the citizens, remained their most important demand.

In order to find a way to resolve the crisis, after the unprecedented violence, both from the ranks of the protesters and, especially, from the police, for which the French authorities were given a warning by the European Council and the United Nations, the government launched a national debate, which took place from mid-December to mid-March 2019, open to all French people and throughout the territory.

The government limited the number of topics that could be discussed to four:

- a) Ecological transition;
- b) Taxes;
- c) Democracy and citizenship;
- d) Organization of the state and public services.

The consultation took place in several phases:

- a) Complaint books and conversations between citizens and mayors;
- b) Local debates organized by local government leaders, associations and individuals;
- c) From January 21, 2019, onwards, citizens could put their opinions and suggestions on a web platform specially made for the occasion;
- d) Conferences with national themes that brought various associations and syndicate together;
- e) Regional conferences that brought randomly selected citizens together.

Due to the lack of trust of the “Yellow Vests” towards the actions of the government, at the end of January 2019, they set up their own web platform, called “True Debate.” Finally, the debates included 10,000 local meetings and almost two million opinions and proposals on dedicated internet platforms. On April 25, 2019, Macron concluded these debates with a press conference, during which he announced a reduction in income tax and the recalculation of small pensions according to the inflation index.

Macron – Policy Change and Stronger Social Dialogue

On the occasion of the centenary of the International Labor Organization, held on June 11th, 2019, President Macron drew attention in his speech to the great inequalities in the world,

saying that he himself experienced the crisis of “Yellow Vests” as “an opportunity to bring a man back to the center” (ONUinfo 2019; Elysée, 2019).

The president, who acquired the title of protector and protege of the rich, radically changed his dialogue, in relation to the first part of his term. In his speech, he warns of the great imbalances and inequalities in the world, which are at the level of the inequalities that existed before the world wars, and expresses his belief that there is a danger of the collapse of democracy. Macron promised more humanity in the second part of his mandate, acknowledging a mistake in the methods employed: “We may, sometimes, construct good answers too far from our fellow citizens... That was a fundamental mistake” (ONUinfo, 2019).

In the temple of tripartite dialogue, the International Labour Organization, the president emphasized the importance of social dialogue for the fight against all forms of inequality, starting with those that are directed towards women, as well as those that are a consequence of the digital transformation. In that regard, he underlined the importance of setting up web platforms on which workers could leave their opinions, emphasizing that new jobs in the digital sphere should not mean insecurity and diminished rights as a result.

In line with his ambition as a European leader, Macron calls for the introduction of a European minimum wage, and speaking on the issue of public debt, he states the following: “I do not want Europe to think that adjusting economic and financial policy to debt, should take precedence over social rights. In that case, we fuel extremes and doubt” (ELYSEE, 2019). This is an explicit *mea culpa* of the president and a significant change of political course.

Conclusions

The level of inequality in the world has reached an alarming level, so that even the bastions of liberal capitalism, such as the International Monetary Fund, warn of imminent cataclysms if a fairer distribution of income is not established and the planet is not protected from hyper-exploitation.

The fact is that Western countries, the forerunners and bearers of this economic course, have found themselves “trapped” in their own model, from which they fail to find a way out, while trying to maintain their leading role in the world economy. By initiating globalization and leading it to its paroxysm, the capitalists of these countries shifted the course of economic development to Asian countries, following the interests of their supranational capital and becoming excessively rich, to the detriment of the rest of the population.

While inequalities at the world level have decreased with the entry of China and other Asian countries on the world market, the main loser of the globalization process is the middle class of Western countries, which is falling apart and thus disrupting the democratic Western system. Although inequalities are less pronounced in France than in other Western countries, the purchasing power of the middle class is an obsessive question, to which the weakened state, under the pressure of high public debt, fails to find an answer. In an attempt to preserve its generous social model, while meeting the requirements of competitiveness in the world market and to comply with the requirements of the European Union regarding the maximum amount of the budget deficit, the French state wanders, putting the greatest pressure on those who, unlike capital owners, do not have much freedom of choice: its middle class.

The collapse of the system is long-lasting and continuous, aided by the fiscal evasion of the richest members of society, which is not prohibited for fear of capital flight. State property has been significantly reduced, while the wealth of wealthy individuals has reached dizzying

levels – which is not only the case in France. The difference between the French and citizens of other Western countries is that the French are accustomed to their social model, which implies a strong state and its services, but after years of economic stagnation, they can no longer “bear” it, with the state trying to limit its own borrowing, even at the expense of social peace.

The tense socio-economic situation has discredited the main political parties that have almost disappeared from public life. Therefore, in the second round of the 2017 presidential election, they found themselves face to face Marine Le Pen, a representative of the extreme right, and Emanuel Macron, a former socialist, who left his party and formed his own, positioned at the center. Their electorates are made, on the one hand, of the lower social strata and the destitute lower middle class, and on the other, of the intellectual-financial elite.

Under such conditions, the social dialogue was significantly compromised even before Macron came to power, but he, by not taking into account the opinion of “the other France,” by taking advantage of the weakness of the union and imposing his will, finally caused a social fracture. It is obvious that the existing trade union organization, bureaucratized and outdated, could not keep up with the accelerated changes in the labor market. So, its inactivity and misunderstanding of new social conditions left a gap, inciting new ways of organizing an unsatisfied population.

In all this, the crucial role was played by the famous social networks, connectivity, openness, and instantaneous transmission of information, which were the main means of the organization on a horizontal level, without hierarchy, to the heterogeneous movement without proclaimed leaders. With the strengthening of the movement, the demand for new forms of organization, that is, for direct democracy, through popular referendums, instead of through representative bodies, became stronger.

Brought to the edge, the government had to quickly seek solutions and renew social dialogue, trying to get closer to the population and make available forums and places where opinions (on issues deemed crucial by the government) could be expressed and heard, trying to channel the energy of the “Yellow Vests” and the rest of the population into a constructive discussion. Significant reforms have been implemented based on the demands of the “Yellow Vests”, which, at least for now, has bought social peace, but with a continuous risk of new escalations in social unrest. With that in mind, President Macron, in his speech at the International Labour Organization, clearly underlined the necessity of social dialogue in achieving a more humane and just society.

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