

Republican Perspective

12 December 2018

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Gilets Jaunes

“It is horrifying that we have to fight our own government to save the environment.”
Ansel Adams, Photographer

Paris is burning. The city that hosted the 2015 environmental accord is experiencing its worst protests and rioting in decades. There is a violent resistance to a tenet of the Paris Accord— reduce carbon footprint. The *gilets jaunes* (yellow vests) have been protesting week-ends starting November 17th, when an estimated 282,000 people took part across the country. The number of protesters has steadily dropped but incidents of violence has increased. Protesters are called *gilets jaunes* for the neon yellow traffic vests they wear.

What is behind the protests? Demonstrators say it is the policy of French President, Emmanuel Macron to increase taxes on gasoline and electricity. The tax hikes were put in place to pay for clean energy programs and “wean the public off fossil fuels.” Rural French people want nothing to do with these programs. They view Macron as president of the elite and wealthy. They claim he is trying to balance the budget on the backs of the working class.

Comments made by the protesters are telling: I’ve been in the Iraq War, sir,” a man told a police officer. “I can’t live with my pension, what can I do?” An elderly woman, said: “My husband has worked all his life. I am retired. My bank account is always in the red.”

The weekend of December 1, 2 was the third straight weekend of protest. They have turned deadly killing three people. On December 1st, at least 133 people were injured including 20 police officers. Nearly 700 have been arrested and almost 400 charged with crimes. Crimes included illegal possession of a weapon and violence against law enforcement officials.

The Arc de Triomphe was among hundreds of buildings attacked by the *gilets jaunes*. The Epoch Times reported that statues and furniture were destroyed, with more than \$1 million in damage. Hundreds of vehicles were burned, and firefighters subdued more than 240 fires. Graffiti desecrated the Arc de Triomphe calling for Macron to resign. Shattered glass and burned cars littered the Rue de Rivoli. The Champs Elysees, France’s most famous tourist mile, was lit with numerous fires. Police fired tear gas, water cannons and rubber bullets to disperse the activists.

The *gilets jaunes* are a mix of left- and right-wing protesters. Most are working class people fed up with high taxes and stagnant wages that are making each paycheck worth less. Many are running out of money with more than a week left to go until the next payday. "It's difficult to reach the end of the month. People work and pay a lot of taxes and we are fed up," Rabah Mendez, a yellow vest in Paris from the French suburbs, told the Associated Press.

In effect, Macron is placing the burden of addressing climate change on the backs of France's rural population. French elites do not share the burden. The high gas tax has little impact on most Parisians and those who live near Paris. Shops and businesses are within walking distance. Public transportation serves their needs well.

Tourism counts for more than 7 percent of France's gross domestic product and employs about 2 million people. The research firm MKG said that the violence on Champs Elysees is likely to cost hotels around Paris at least 10 million euros in booking cancellations.

On December 4th, the French government delayed the implementation of the fuel tax for six months. Also, there will be no increase in the price of natural gas and electricity during this period. Prime Minister Édouard Philippe said, "No tax is worth putting in danger the unity of the nation." How nationalistic.

According to a recent BVA opinion survey, 72 percent of the French support the *gilets jaunes* movement. Macron's approval rating stands at 23 percent. Macron and his party have six months to determine whether to put environmentalism ahead of the economic interests of the French people.

Are the *gilets jaunes* a precursor to California? Many working class Californians have long commutes to their jobs. All face high gasoline taxes and electric prices. Will coastal environmental elites continue to promote higher energy taxes? Is Tom Steyer watching the French?