

# \* The “gilets jaunes” seen from my workplace

## \* THE BEGINNING OF THE “GILETS JAUNES” MOVEMENT AT MY WORKPLACE

The first guy who mentioned the “gilets jaunes” was a coach driver, particularly racist and xenophobic while being at the same time hostile to his foremen and boss, in a very rightwing anti-capitalist sense. At that time (in October), the “gilets jaunes” had not yet become the darling of the media. At first, I thought it was a movement against the speed limit, as it has been recently reduced and many car drivers were unhappy about it. I saw this driver repeatedly calling his colleagues to induce them to wear the yellow vest, to vote on the Internet or Facebook on some mysterious websites or FB groups, etc. The coach drivers (at least those who are not employed by temp agencies – and they are quite numerous) earn 2,500 euros a month and have all sorts of “benefits” (for example, they receive 18 euros for their meals at the restaurant while we get only 5 euros per meal – the price of a sandwich) related to their good collective and company’s agreements which “protect” coach and lorry drivers... until now. They all live in the suburbs and have to spend at least an hour of commute (by car) to go and get their coach in the morning at the garage and bring it back in the evening or in the middle of the night.

I do not know if this bus driver is a militant of the National Front (today Rassemblement National), in any case he perfectly defends the line of this party: he supports the Frexit, is against immigration, against taxes, against foreign coach drivers, against the Roma who beg money at all tourist places, against Macron and Hidalgo, etc. This coach driver and others then told me about the social networks that structured this Gilets jaunes movement, and about the social networks that, for them, are the only ones which “tell the truth.”

He is not the only one to think like that, since one of my colleagues (I am a tourist attendant), a member of the Parti de Gauche (a social-chauvinist split from the mainstream Socialist Party), told me “I never read newspapers or watch television because they were “all liars”“. Obviously when I showed him an article of a bourgeois daily (*Le Monde*) which described the conservative or far right positions of the initiators of this movement, he replied: “Oh yes, it does not surprise me from *Le Monde* !”

I encountered the same kind of hostile reactions with some radical left comrades who called me a “conspiracy theorist” or a “defeatist” because I pointed out the ambiguities of this movement and its pseudo-spontaneous forms of “organization”.

But I do not think that I am supporting conspiracy theories when I observe the influence of the content of the social networks on the mentality, the political conceptions of the “people”, these new and admirable social protagonists supported by all political tendencies, from the French far left to the far right, not to speak of the dominant media (TV, radios, newspapers) which all support the “gilets jaunes”. Anyone born in the 1950s (which is my case) can only note the difference with “our times” where political discussions and engagements depended on direct personal and human ties with the trade unionists in our company, high school or university, with the CP or Socialist Party militants who lived in our neighborhood, with those who sold the CP weekly on our local market, and so on.

## \* STRENGTH AND LIMITS OF SOCIAL NETWORKS IN A SMALL VICTORIOUS STRUGGLE AT MY WORKPLACE

To explain the advantages and flaws of social networks, the best I can do is to describe two (victorious !) “movements” which happened at my workplace. We obliged the boss to give in twice to our demands, simply by exchanging messages on WhatsApp or emails between us, without having any face-to-face meetings, and finally writing two different collective letters to the boss, presented at meetings between the boss and the trade unions by a delegate from a very “moderate” union ... All of this did not come from a conspiracy of any “undercover minority” (most of my colleagues are not unionized and do not belong to any party); it was simply a form of protest and a way to combine our individual angers against our working conditions and to turn them into a kind of “pre-strike notice”, without making any strike in the real world ... And it worked!

During both of these “movements”, I noticed that the most violent people, at least language-wise, were also those who did not want us to meet and were very comfortable with WhatsApp, while the more moderate or more willing to reach a healthy consensus among ourselves (like me) would have preferred that we all meet and discuss to be sure that we will really agreed to strike in case our boss did not back off. These are typically the strength and limits of a “struggle” based on the social networks in a company

employing 200 people, including less than twenty employee directly concerned and “mobilized” in the virtual space. So you can imagine how this kind of Facebook-based “movement” can affect an entire country when it’s not a small group of 20 people (like in my company) but dozens of Facebook groups, each one supported by tens of thousands of people, groups initiated and “moderated” by reactionaries who claim to be “apolitical” and against the unions. The Cinque Stelle (Five Stars) Movement in Italy, Bolsonaro in Brazil and Trump in the States used these communication techniques to get to power, but apparently the Left does not recognize these methods when they are used right in front of its nose.

### \* BRAIN WASHING “PEOPLE” THROUGH FACEBOOK

The strength that an individual, or a group, possesses when it initiates a “movement” in the cyberspace is such that his or her Facebook “friends” believe that their language, their ideas, belong to them in their own right, while it is this guy, woman, or group, who models their minds by discreetly instilling certain reactionary words and ideas. The events of the “gilets jaunes” were all summoned through the social networks. The themes, slogans, essential discussions happen and happened on the social networks. Only afterwards the “people” met in the real world. The question is: if “people” are brain washed by communities of “friends” on Facebook, how do they magically get rid of all the reactionary ideas they shared before on Facebook ? just by meeting each other face-to-face in a demo or on a road block ?

Most French Trotskyist, anarchist and autonomous–insurrectionist groups answer more or less in the same way: “Well, it’s simple, by talking with us who have the right ideas and / or the right program, they will change their minds”. One can be skeptical about this blissful optimism because the “Nuits debout” operation in 2016, operation which partly rested on different social circles, gave birth to nothing, even if it was enthusiastically and uncritically supported by most currents of the Left at that time...

Obviously we can all hope that “spontaneous” encounters in the real world between the “gilets jaunes” sympathizers will work miracles. But, in any case, at my workplace, with my colleagues, with whom I often discuss, I do not see the slightest progress ... if not that of reactionary ideas about the “Caste” our the “Super Class” (a vocabulary shared by the Far Right and the “Insoumis” and Parti de Gauche of Jean-Luc Mélenchon), the fact that “Macron” takes his orders from the “Finance”, the IMF or the World Bank, etc. In short, all the basic no global simplistic ideology, which is also that of the “Insoumis”, the Parti de Gauche and the National Front (Rassemblement National).

Comrades who attentively observe the “fachosphere”, and more generally the “patriosphere”, note that the most politicized reactionaries (the pure fascists, or the members of the National Front/Rassemblement National, Debout la France, Identitaires, etc.) choose popular themes (speed limitation, presence of radars, “ecological” measures to limit the traffic in Paris or elsewhere, fuel price increase, etc.) to initiate debates or launch common causes, most often under acronyms with neutral or even left-wing names, such as the website “participatory democracy” blocked by the French justice in November 2018 because of its racist, antisemitic and homophobic content.

As early as 2010, we had a good example with Riposte Laïque (Secular Answer), a tiny group led by former Trotskyist, feminist and CP militants, which politicized the question of Muslim “street prayers” in the 18th arrondissement of Paris on the Internet and social networks until finally their virtual agitation made the front page of the media. Marine Le Pen and the mainstream right took up their reactionary cause and denounced Muslims as “invasors”...

At my job, after the 17th of November, when there were the first violent clashes near the presidential palace, and even more after the 24th of November, the most reactionary coach driver, the one who first spoke of the “Gilets jaunes” to his colleagues, had a perfect explanation : “The media incriminate the far right but in fact it’s the leftists’ responsibility.”. And it should not surprise us that fascists spread all kinds of silly rumors ...

In short, the Lepénist, national-populist and fascist activists do not hide their far-right opinions in their work environment, they urge their colleagues to participate in the “gilets jaunes” movement, then they say, with their hands on their hearts “But the extreme right is not responsible for anything.”

It’s gross but it works.

I do not deny the very diverse angers of the “people” who participate or sympathize with the “gilets jaunes” movement. But I do not think it can lead to something positive especially when two of its claims are the expulsion of asylum seekers who did not get their stay permit and the end of so-called “dependence on social benefits” paid by the state (i.e. we « poor tax payers » who work and are not parasites – bosses are never seen as parasites by those « gilets jaunes »!) And when they don’t even

demand the liberation of their Facebook “friends” when they are arrested and condemned by the courts, when they try to find all sorts of excuses for police violence against themselves, etc.

According to a comrade who carefully observes social networks, it is the so-called “middle classes”, the waged petty bourgeoisie of the “cadres” (4 million, according to him, in France ; I suppose he included what the National statistic institute calls “intermediate professions”<sup>1</sup>) who express themselves the most on social networks. And these middle-class leftists are astonished to find that they have the same daily problems and distorted ideas about capitalism as the petty bourgeois yellow jackets. An astonishing discovery for these individuals coming from the same social class, the petty bourgeoisie, which masters social networks and sets the tone on Facebook.

#### \* LET'S GO BACK TO SOME BASIC POLITICAL ISSUES

To conclude, we must perhaps return to what interests us, that is to say a SOCIAL Revolution, not to say a SOCIALIST revolution.

If one defends a Leninist or crypto-Leninist perspective (one must build a Party to make the Revolution), it is obvious that one can jump on any movement. The objective is then, at worst for this group, to recruit some sympathizers or future militants; at best, to take the lead of the movement, to provoke an armed confrontation with the state and if “one” loses, it does not matter, it will another experience for the proletariat”!

If one defends an anarchist perspective, one generally believes that the state is weak and will collapse by itself (like many leftists, the anarchists, when they are optimistic, do not want to think about the development of the state and its sophisticated means of control over the population and prefer to believe that the state will collapse automatically).

If one defends an insurrectionist-autonomist perspective, one believes that “one” will take power by using weapons without preparation and the state will collapse all by itself.

If one defends a non-interventionist perspective favorable to workers councils’ power, one believes that the working class holds all the answers, like the Pythia of Delphi, it is enough to wait until it finds them ....

Many revolutions, insurrections and riots have occurred until now and there will be many others during the following years. The real issue is to think about their meaning.

But I do not believe that there can be any socialist revolution:

- **outside of the main places of production**, even if, in Europe, there are no longer large concentrations of workers in the same gigantic factories or the same office buildings. In fact, from the “autonomous-insurrectionists” to the Trotskyists, almost all have adopted (officially or unofficially) the ideology of the revolutions in the squares, of the street riots that mechanically bring down the state or bring to power the reformists that will then overturned – or politically eliminated ;

- **without a considerable rise in the level of consciousness of the workers** (and not just the “people”): this presupposes intense political discussions, sustainable forms of democratic organization, etc. ;

- **without the existence of several revolutionary organizations implanted in the working class** and which have clear ideas about what socialism is.

If these three minimum conditions are not met, and they are not met anywhere on this planet, we can witness serious political crises (as it may be the case in France in the coming months) but by no means social or socialist revolutions.

Y.C., *Ni patrie ni frontières*, 12/9/2018

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<sup>1</sup> <http://mondialisme.org/spip.php?article1319> “France : Social classes and « socio-professional categories”