

YELLOW VEST PROTESTS CONTINUE IN FRANCE

By Donnelly McClelland

France's yellow vest protesters were back on the streets on Saturday [2 February] to keep up the pressure on French President Emmanuel Macron's government and to decry the number of people being injured by police during the anti-government demonstrations. Multiple protests in Paris and other cities denounced Mr Macron's economic policies, which they view as favouring the rich, for the 12th straight weekend of demonstrations. Most were peaceful. (*TIME Magazine*)

Who are the "gilets jaunes" (yellow vests)?

The French protesters known as "gilets jaunes" or "yellow vests" – for their use of the distinctive yellow high-visibility jackets required to be carried in every vehicle by French law – have staged some of the most comprehensive protests seen in France since 1968. What many of the protesters had in common at the outset was their reliance on cars to get around, often living in more rural and less populated parts of the country, and thus the initial action which they responded to was the proposed sharp increase in fuel tax.

There is a grassroots-level movement without a leader, though there are some prominent spokespeople. It has been organised via online groups and Facebook pages, and members have presented their grievances through petitions, videos and calls to action. As the movement has grown, their demands have evolved into a general anger at higher living costs and President Emmanuel Macron's economic policies. Some experts describe the majority of the protesters as "people who struggle to make ends meet at the end of the month". After almost three months of weekly protests, the movement now cuts across broad sections of society, across professions and geography as well as race, age and gender and includes members of the working and middle classes, all affected by the higher cost of living. Its members range from factory workers and the unemployed to the self-employed (particularly artisans) and retired people.

What are their grievances?

What began as a tax hike protest has developed into a general disillusionment with Mr Macron and his government. He was elected on a platform of economic reform, which the French people were assured would improve their lot – lowering unemployment and kick-starting the economy. However, many feel this hasn't happened and an analysis of the 2018-19 budget paints a bleak picture. France's public policy institute found in their analysis of the budget that the poorest quarter of households would largely see their income drop or stay the same under Mr Macron's proposed economic reforms. Middle-income earners would see a modest improvement, but the greatest beneficiaries would be those who are already wealthy, in the top 1%. The outlook for retired people was the worst – almost all of whom will be worse off under the proposed reform plans.

But the movement is about more than economic justice: it is also about democracy. A critical demand is for greater participation in decision-making, for greater control over their own lives. A majority of French people see Mr Macron as cut off from reality. A recent poll by *Elabe* found that almost eight in 10 French people thought he was authoritarian. In an attempt to address this apparent lack of representation, Mr Macron initiated the national "great debate".

The national "great debate"

In January, Mr Macron announced three months of national town hall meetings — "grand debates" — to hear the grievances of protesters in the hopes of addressing them. In a letter to the French people published on 13 January, Mr Macron explained the debates were a way to "transform anger into solutions". Mr Macron's vast nationwide debate process, which continues until March, is an exercise that has never been attempted before in France. Some political opponents – and gilets jaunes protesters themselves – have questioned whether the government will really listen to citizens' suggestions. In a recent public meeting, Mr Macron admitted that France has seen a "breakdown in equality". Many participants in these debates have expressed their exasperation to the president, warning of the "segregation" and "ghettoisation" of communities.



Philippe Rio, the Communist mayor of Grigny, received applause when he said that deprived communities on the outskirts of cities “don’t want charity but justice”. He went on to explain that social and “territorial apartheid” exists in France and has not been fixed by the state. He said people on housing estates felt that in the eyes of the government they didn’t exist, that the French promise of “liberty, equality, fraternity” was “reserved for those of a certain caste”.

FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Protests anywhere in the world indicate a discontent, and where there is discontent, there is a door of opportunity for the Gospel. Many times, this discontent indicates a deeper need beyond those expressed, and so often no government is in a position to address those deeper issues of the heart. But the Lord does offer answers and help, through His Church. Arlin Hendrix, a preacher in Lyon, expressed his view of the protests: “High taxes, low incomes and politics have contributed to the unrest, but the real problem is that so many people do not know God and live selfishly only for themselves — people of all political perspectives. Our prayers are for peace, of course. But we also pray that this crisis, and others, turn people to God for answers. We have often said to ourselves that it may take a crisis for the French to see that their needs can only be met in God. We pray for our French friends — that they turn to God — and this may be one way that God is answering that prayer. We pray also that we will be there to help them find God in their time of need.”

Catholic leaders in France have generally been cautious in their reactions to the demonstrations, expressing sympathy for those bearing the brunt of economic reforms but stopping short of supporting the “yellow vest” movement which has led to violence and destruction of property. Bishop Gilbert Aubry of the Diocese of Saint-Denis de la Réunion, on the small island of Réunion in the Indian Ocean, has been more forthright in addressing the situation, which has also affected this French territory. In an article released in the local media, Bishop Aubry said that while civil unrest and violence were unacceptable, the wider economic climate had to be considered.

A Facebook community of believers called Pray for France posted the following: “Pray for the Church to rise up and go into the streets as long as the Gilets Jaunes are still there. When else do you have the opportunity to go and meet people whose lives are so hard that they go into the streets to proclaim their needs? It's like a big banner saying, ‘We need Jesus. Who will tell us about Him?’”

PRAY

- **For the leadership to receive godly counsel in addressing the people’s grievances**
- **For these times of crisis to turn people to God for answers**
- **For the Church in France to help those who are seeking answers and help, to find the Lord in their time of need**

IMAGE SOURCE:

<https://d2pggiv3o55wnc.cloudfront.net/oann/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/AP19033489955903.jpg>