

# Revolt over high fuel prices threatens to paralyse France

Rise of the 'gilets jaunes' coincides with Macron's record low 26% approval rating

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In just a few weeks, the yellow hi-vis vest has become such a potent political symbol that one risks being mistaken for a supporter of the rebellious *gilets jaunes* when cycling in Paris.

The *gilets jaunes* are a grass-roots revolt against high fuel prices, and they threaten to paralyse France on Saturday.

The cause of the price hikes are “eco taxes” meant to dissuade the French from using cars. “We choose to tax pollution and harmful products rather than workers,” budget minister Gérald Darmanin explains. Yet the fuel taxes penalise the poor disproportionately.

In the hope of deflating the protests, prime minister Édouard Philippe on Wednesday announced €500 million of compensatory measures, including a €5,000 bonus for low-income earners who trade in polluting cars for a hybrid model.



The *gilets jaunes* have organised at least 630 protests nationwide via the [blocage17novembre.com](http://blocage17novembre.com) website, designed by an 18-year-old student. Some call for go-slows on highways. Others want to block roads, which is punishable by two years in prison and a €4,500 fine. Interior minister Christophe Castaner says no “total blockage” will be tolerated.

But several police unions have expressed sympathy, and promised not to punish petty or “middle-size” offences “out of solidarity with the citizens”.

## Unlikely heroine

The movement has found an unlikely symbol in Jacline Mouraud, a 51-year-old accordion player, hypnotist and spiritual medium from Brittany who on October 18th posted a video message hectoring President Emmanuel Macron for “persecuting drivers”.

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Mouraud's video went viral, and has been viewed by more than six million people. “I have a thing or two to tell you,” she starts out. The stream of accusations includes the price of fuel, the “hunt” for diesel vehicles, the “forest” of radars, the number of traffic tickets, the possibility tolls may be charged to enter large towns and rumours of mandatory bicycle registration.



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“What are you doing with the dough, apart from changing the china at the Élysée and building a swimming pool?” Mouraud asks Macron.

A senior adviser to Macron spoke scathingly of “this Madame Mouraud who generates spirits from under her fingernails”. He expressed consternation that a video “stuffed with lies” has reached such a wide audience, saying: “I have the feeling that our democracy is also at stake.”

Yet the Élysée “is absolutely not condescending towards this movement”, the adviser continued. “We don’t underestimate its amplitude. Our vigilance is total, even if the signals are blurred.”

The rise of the *gilets jaunes* coincides with Macron’s record low 26 per cent approval rating. A poll published by Ifop on November 14th indicates two-thirds of French people expect a “social explosion” in coming months.

Macron has tried to counter the disillusionment by spending the first week of November on the road in northeastern France and by repeated appeals to reason. In a television interview given on the Charles de Gaulle aircraft carrier on Wednesday night, he said he wants to govern “in a different manner” in future. The French want respect, protection and solutions, “not declarations”, Macron said. He promised that henceforward, his administration will spend much more time “on the ground”.

The senior adviser noted that Macron’s reforms, for example of the pension system, unemployment insurance and

professional training, are not contested. “What the *gilets jaunes* movement captures is an irritation over purchasing power, fuel prices ... It is possible that we paid too much attention to structural reforms and not enough to the daily life of the French.”

## The bodyguard

Pascal Perrineau, a professor at Sciences Po and one of France’s leading political scientists, notes that Macron’s popularity collapsed in three stages. In May 2017, the month of his election, Macron had a 62 per cent approval rating. He fell 17 percentage points the first summer, when the *classes populaires* decided that Macron represented the rich, not them.

In late 2017 and early 2018, older people deserted Macron because he increased their social contributions and decided pensions would no longer be inflation-indexed. Last summer he began to lose his core middle-class supporters, because of the misconduct of his bodyguard, Alexandre Benalla, and several statements that were deemed arrogant or condescending.

Perrineau said strident, systematic criticism of Macron is often “not deserved” but that the president nonetheless “asks for it” by carelessly offending voters.

The government has accused the far right of trying to exploit the *gilets jaunes*. Several officials from Marine Le Pen’s Rassemblement National and Nicolas Dupont Aignan’s movement are helping to mobilise for Saturday’s protests, but some mainstream parties also want to curry favour with the demonstrators.

Though media portray Le Pen as a spent force, “her electorate is still there”, says Perrineau. A recent poll showed the RN leads voting intentions for the European parliamentary election next May, at 21 per cent to 19 per cent for Macron’s La République en Marche.

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