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Voluntary - Public

**Date:** 12/20/2018

**GAIN Report Number:** FR1829

## France

**Post:** Paris

### Select French Farmers Protest along with the Yellow Vest Movement

**Report Categories:**

Agricultural Situation

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**Report Highlights:**

Since November 2018, the Yellow Vest (Gilets Jaunes) movement created through social media and rooted in French rural areas has organized protests throughout France. They initially focused on the French government's plan to increase taxes on diesel fuel but their focus has broadened into more general anger about the cost of living. In December 2018, the farm unions closest to the far-right and to the far-left joined the Yellow Vests' protests. The largest French farmers union (FNSEA) decided to differentiate itself from the Yellow Vest movement and have their own protests focused on farmers' incomes, impractical standards imposed on farmers, excessive taxes, and attacks on farmers by the media and NGOs.

France's rural areas have seen the number of public services decline in recent years and rural residents are much more dependent on cars than those living in France's major cities. The French government's plan to increase taxes on diesel fuel in order to reduce greenhouse gas emissions catalyzed a nascent movement against the current French administration seen by members of the movement as a government exclusively for the urban elite. Discontentment and frustration over not being heard led to the *Yellow Vest*<sup>1</sup> movement, one that grew quickly through social media.

Protests have turned violent and have involved destruction in urban areas such as broken store fronts, looted stores and offices, burned cars, vandalization of public property, and the defacement of major monuments like the Arc de Triomphe. The protests are not just located in Paris, but in other major cities such as Lyon, Bordeaux, and Strasbourg where they also have involved violence and destruction of property. The initial movement that coalesced with the increasing taxes on diesel, a fuel more needed and common in rural areas, then turned into a more general frustration about the cost of living and class divisions. Increasing violence led French President Macron to drop the fuel tax and to announce a number of measures aimed at boosting consumers' purchasing power on December 9, 2018. He raised the minimum wage by 100 euros (\$114) a month and scrapped a planned tax on pensions under 2,000 euros (\$2,272) per month. However, the French administration has no specific person to negotiate with because the Yellow Vests have no leader.

In contrast to the United States, the rural vote is not weighted through an Electoral College, the Presidential election is a popular vote. This means that urban areas have a much stronger voice and rural areas can be discounted by national politicians. In addition, the French Senate is not an equivalent body to the National Assembly, unlike the more equally balanced U.S. Senate and House. Laws can be passed and implemented without the Senate's agreement. The current National Assembly has a large majority of urban elected representatives of the President's En Marche party. Many rural residents have felt their interests had been actively ignored by the current Macron Administration and the En Marche party and felt that a movement was necessary in order to be heard.

Unlike usual protests controlled by powerful unions in France, the Yellow Vests have no central organization. Although the movement is nonpolitical, many of the protesters vote for either Le Pen's far-right or Melenchon's far-left party. In December 2018, the farm unions closest to the far-right (*Coordination rurale*) and to the far-left (*Confédération paysanne*) joined the Yellow Vest protests in several regions of France. The largest and most recognized in France (*FNSEA*) equivalent to the U.S. Farm Bureau, also organized protests in December but it differentiates itself from the Yellow Vests.

FNSEA concerns are:

- **“Agri-bashing,”** meaning that the media give a negative and false image of agriculture and farmers to the general public. They feel they are constantly portrayed as polluters and deplore increasing attacks from animal rights activists.

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<sup>1</sup> “*gilets jaunes*” in French; movement named after the yellow safety vests people are required to carry in their cars

- **Farmers' low incomes** and the need to quickly implement the recently voted law on agriculture, especially when it comes to retailers' commercial practices. Farmers feel that they lack bargaining power compared to the food industry and retailers and that it reduces their incomes.
- **Excessive standards and taxes**, especially as compared to other countries of the European Union's single market.