

Patients denied care as Macron announces coronavirus lockdown in France

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In a brief, insincere speech yesterday evening, President Emmanuel Macron announced the indefinite closure of schools and issued empty calls for solidarity against the coronavirus epidemic. As cases surge globally, however, he announced no new health funding or construction of new hospitals or expanded production facilities to make medical equipment, testing kits and medicine to face this deadly global pandemic.

Macron announced that “starting Monday and indefinitely, day care centers, schools, high schools and universities will be closed.” This countermanded Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer, who yesterday afternoon was still insisting that all educational facilities would remain open, even though they would then spread the virus. Macron also announced that the state would reimburse business owners and pay reduced wages to workers at firms forced to close for public health reasons.

Other measures included banning visits to the elderly in retirement homes, freeing up beds in hospitals including by postponing all noncritical surgery, and the decision to continue nonetheless with the municipal elections, whose first round is scheduled this weekend.

While quarantining as much of the population as possible at home to limit personal contact and the spread of disease is essential, Macron’s plan is fatally flawed from its inception. A successful quarantine involves not only isolating the population to limit the spread of the disease, but also identifying and treating the sick, so they can recover and do not reinfect the rest of the population after the end of the quarantine. However, French health authorities have already announced that they will try to deny testing and care to many of those they suspect to be infected.

Currently there are 2,786 confirmed coronavirus cases in France and 61 deaths—a small fraction of the 12,462 cases and 827 deaths in neighboring Italy, the pandemic’s epicenter in Europe. French authorities nevertheless insist

it is already beyond them to test and treat all the sick. Dr Wilfrid Sammut of the Association of Emergency Doctors of France (AMUF) stated: ‘Given the number of contaminated individuals, we have decided to only test potentially serious cases, elderly patients with symptoms, and health care staff.’

As a result, younger individuals in France who experience coronavirus symptoms after being exposed to other coronavirus patients are often sent home without testing, told to take over-the-counter drugs and contact health authorities only if they become critically ill. Adopted in Italy, these methods have led to a surge in deaths among patients in their 30s and 40s, who only arrive in hospital for treatment when they are already dying of pneumonia.

Asked about these guidelines by *Le Monde*, who euphemistically noted that patients and health care professionals are “perplexed,” Professor Eric Caumes of the Pitié-Salpêtrière hospital in Paris defended them. He said, “What is happening to us is just what happened in China: initially, doctors tested everyone, then later they established diagnoses by doing x-rays.” However, the situations in China and Europe are clearly different. X-rays of younger patients in China were taken after they were admitted to hospital—something health authorities in Europe increasingly refuse to do.

This echoes the fascistic policy announced by Macron’s ally, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who has said that while tens of millions of Germans will contract coronavirus, they should not “overburden” the health care system.

Macron tried to give this sinister policy a “progressive” veneer, cynically posing as an opponent of selfish nationalism and demanding solidarity from the French people on this basis. Warning of the danger of “nationalist isolation,” he said: “This virus has no passport. We must unify our forces, coordinate our responses and cooperate.

European coordination is essential, and I will ensure it goes forward.”

This is a political lie. In fact, the coronavirus pandemic has exposed the selfish and nationalist policy pursued by the European Union’s (EU) leading powers. France has requisitioned all its national stocks of medical equipment, and Germany has banned exports of medical supplies, ignoring urgent appeals for help from Italy—even as thousands of Italians die, and large swathes of Italy’s health system are submerged with badly ill patients.

The “European coordination” Macron wants aims not to save lives, but to let the European Central Bank (ECB) print money to bail out financial markets and the super-rich. Macron was speaking as a global stock market crash unfolded yesterday that saw the Paris stock exchange’s worst one-day performance in history: a 12 percent fall. Several financial commentators attacked the ECB for not further cutting its rates from -0.5 to -0.75 percent, and for printing only €120 billion for bank bailouts instead of nearly 3 trillion euros after the 2008 Wall Street crash.

Macron, a former investment banker, indicated that he would demand a far greater ECB payoff to the financial markets. “The European Central Bank has already informed us of its first decisions,” he said. “Will they be enough? I don’t think so. Europe will react in an organized, massive way to protect its economy.”

The care for tens of thousands of coronavirus patients across Europe and internationally cannot be left subject to the whims of the markets and of bankers like Macron. The coronavirus crisis has exposed that the entire course of European austerity policy, implemented since the 1991 Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union and the creation of the EU in 1992, was destructive and socially reactionary. Workers must be mobilized across Europe and beyond against corrupt capitalist ruling elites to defend basic social rights, including access to medical care.

With stunning hypocrisy, Macron went on to praise France’s public health care system: “What this pandemic has already revealed is that universal free medical care ... and our welfare state are not costs or burdens, but precious goods, indispensable strengths when fate strikes.” He claimed that he had concluded from the pandemic that “there are goods and services that must be placed beyond the laws of the market.”

Who does Macron think he is kidding? For two years, he has been sending riot police to viciously crack down on ‘yellow vest’ protests against social inequality and mass strikes against his policies of privatizing railways,

slashing public sector workers’ wages, and slashing pensions. It has been widely reported that, after he finishes his pension cuts through the National Assembly and then cutting unemployment insurance, he plans to next slash France’s Social Security system for financing health care.

Macron’s lying promises won him accolades from the pseudo-left charlatan Jean-Luc Mélenchon. Demanding that there should not be “polemics” but “solidarity and cohesion,” Mélenchon claimed Macron had had a change of heart: “It took a crisis, an international one in fact, to convince the president that a certain model of society is dead and that everyone should get care as a priority.”

Mélenchon’s attempts to stimulate illusions in Macron, who is widely hated, are absurd. New eruptions of class struggle are being prepared. In this context, defeating the coronavirus pandemic requires the political mobilization of the working class, independent of Mélenchon and his allies in the union bureaucracy, to prevent capitalist governments in France and beyond from denying care to the sick. Workers will have to fight for:

- Free health care of equal quality for all. Treating the pandemic will require a massive mobilization of industrial, personnel and financial resources, organized and coordinated on an international scale. Markets’ demands for profit cannot be allowed to interfere with life-saving medical care.
- Dignified conditions during quarantines. Democratic rights must be respected, and all those forced to stay at home in quarantine must receive social support, food, and all necessities.
- Independent factory and neighborhood committees. In quarantine or not, workers must organize to coordinate their collective strength and force necessary measures to be taken. These include ensuring that capitalist police states do not use the quarantine as a pretext to further attack democratic rights; instead, the working class must concentrate power in its hands to carry out a socialist transformation of society, based on social need not private profit.



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