

Army enters Paris as Macron announces coronavirus lockdown in France

Alex Lantier, Jacques Valentin
17 March 2020

Last night, military vehicles entered Paris as President Emmanuel Macron announced in a televised address that the French population would be placed under confinement amid the coronavirus pandemic. The total number of SARS-CoV-2 cases in France grew by 1,210 yesterday to 6,663, with 148 deaths.

For weeks, French political authorities have downplayed the dangers posed by the coronavirus pandemic, and taken disjointed, belated and insufficient actions, wasting precious time for combating the disease. Until last Thursday, the government's main concern was to reassure the financial markets that all economic activity would continue as usual.

"Beginning tomorrow at midday, going for a walk and meeting friends in the park or on the street, will no longer be possible," Macron said. "It is a matter of limiting all contacts outside the house to a minimum. On all French territories, overseas and here, only necessary travel will be allowed: To go shopping, while maintaining a one-meter separation from others, without holding hands, without hugging. Obviously, this includes travel to work, when working from home is not possible."

Macron did not place any restrictions on the operations of large non-essential companies, except vaguely referring to requirements that employers put in place safe conditions.

After the speech by Macron, Interior Minister Christophe Castaner announced that 100,000 police and gendarmes would be deployed to the streets to maintain the quarantine. To leave their homes, people must carry forms that can be downloaded from the interior ministry website to certify that they are going out for authorized reasons: shopping, medical care, helping a dependent person, or work. Police will give 38-euro fines, soon to be raised to 135 euros, for violations.

The lock-down is to last 15 days but will be renewable by Macron's order. Given that the incubation period of the disease lasts 14 days, it is likely that the number of cases will rise rapidly throughout the first period of containment; the health services would then need to renew the containment in order to identify and diagnose all the patients.

As in Italy and Spain, the French army is being mobilized. It will build a field hospital to treat coronavirus patients in the east of the country, which has been particularly affected. As Macron spoke, images were published on social media showing armored personnel tanks and other military vehicles arriving in Paris.

It remains unclear what measures are being taken to support workers and small business by these major restrictions on economic activity. Macron claimed that 300 billion euros would be used to assist businesses, including by exempting them from rent and payroll taxes that fund social spending. Macron also pledged that "partial unemployment" payments would be expanded to cover all workers who lose their job due to the pandemic at 84 percent of their net wages, according to government statements to the press.

Nor did Macron explain why Europe is not mobilizing hundreds of billions of euros to support the public healthcare system in the treatment of the sick, while Italy, devastated by the virus, desperately needs international support. In contrast, the European central bank has already announced the provision of 120 billion euros directly to the financial markets.

As part of a destructive, nationalist reaction by governments internationally faced with a pandemic whose treatment urgently requires international coordination, research and funding, Macron announced that the EU member states had agreed to close the

bloc's external borders.

Like Prime Minister Philippe in his speech last Saturday, President Macron used his speech to berate the population for failing to adhere to directions from medical authorities, and to hold it responsible for the failure of the government to take any substantial action to address the virus.

This is an attempt to justify the government's assertion of vast state powers, not only to isolate people as necessary during a pandemic, but to suspend democratic rights in the face of a "national emergency." In fact, only three days ago, the government was maintaining that it was safe for the population to stand in long queues and vote in the municipal elections, which the government insisted must go ahead, and which saw a record level of abstention as voters sought to avoid the virus.

Macron had regularly repeated for more than a week that the country would move "inevitably" onto the highest stage of an epidemic, meaning that the virus would saturate large portions of the population, while the media and government maintained a silence about the catastrophic implications of such a massive spread of the fatal disease.

On Thursday, Macron announced the closure of all schools, universities and creches beginning yesterday. On Saturday, Prime Minister Edouard Philippe announced the closure from midnight that evening of non-essential businesses. Last night, Macron reversed the government's plans to continue with the municipal elections, postponing the second round indefinitely, meaning that the first round will also have to be repeated as well.

The decision by the governments of France, Italy and Spain to announce complete confinement is at the same time an expression of their own bankruptcy. Had quarantines taken place weeks ago, they could have saved thousands of lives, and prevented tens of thousands from contracting the illness. A complicit inaction prevailed in the highest political levels in Europe as in the United States.

The Italian government in Italy was the first to adopt quarantine measures last Wednesday. Over the following three days, wildcat strikes spread across the country in the automotive, metal and logistics industries, as workers demanded the idling of factories and the right to stay at home if their work was not

essential to the fight against the disease. Similar strikes erupted among auto workers in Canada, postal workers in Britain, and bus drivers in Paris.

The fears of a social explosion by workers, after a wave of strikes and "yellow vest" protests that has lasted two years in France, played a major role in the calculations of the corporate and financial elite. Their strategists know that the pandemic has laid bare the disaster produced by the policies of austerity in Europe that have slashed hospital budgets for decades. The anger in the working class explodes regularly across Europe.

Pointing to the danger of "disorder," Macron said that after the end of the pandemic, "We will win, but this period will have taught us a lot. A lot of certainties and convictions are being swept aside and placed in doubt. A lot of things that we thought were impossible are occurring. Let us understand that the day after, when we will have won, it will not be like the day before. We will be stronger morally, and we will have won much."

Macron also pledged to suspend all the austerity cuts currently in course. "Nothing must divert us," he said. "This is why I've decided to suspend all the reforms underway, including to the pension system."

Workers cannot take in good faith the promises of the European Union or Macron, the president of the rich, who, only a few weeks ago, was tear-gassing protests of nurses and healthcare workers—the same workers the government now labels as heroes. The lockdown in France and the recourse to the army point to the threat of a major expansion of the police state that has been used against the "yellow vests" and strikers.

The working class must mobilize to demand a humane and equal treatment of all those who are sick, full wages and decent living conditions for all workers and small businesspeople affected by the quarantine, and the end of austerity across Europe.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact