

French President Macron announces a premature end to quarantine in the interests of the financial elite

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French president Emmanuel Macron delivered a televised address on Monday night to defend his government's disastrous response to the coronavirus pandemic. Macron also announced an end date to the nationwide quarantine, without providing any health-based justification for doing so.

Across Europe, governments are compelling workers to return to work in the midst of an epidemic. In Spain and Austria, workers' anger has erupted on social media in the face of return-to-work orders imposed by the trade unions, even as thousands of new coronavirus cases are reported each day. The British and Spanish governments openly declare that a majority of the population will have to catch the disease, in the hope that the survivors develop an immunity allowing them to continue to work.

Macron had already raised the need to return to the job, which would sustain the hundreds of billions of euros that the central banks and government are pouring into the financial markets. His speech Monday fell within the same basic framework. Without specifying what change in the situation would allow a safe ending of the quarantine, the president ordered a return to work, delaying it until May 11.

Workers cannot trust the "president of the rich" with such a life-and-death question. A general quarantine was adopted in Europe only after a wave of strikes in Italy that spread to France, Spain, Great Britain and beyond. The question is posed of a movement of the working class to impose a rational, planned and scientific response to the pandemic on a global scale.

While an Odoxa poll indicates that 70 percent of the population do not trust the government, and that 88 percent think the quarantine should have begun earlier, Macron began his speech this week with congratulations to his own government. He praised himself for the fact

that "the hospitals have been able to treat all those who were presented to them."

In fact, the hospitals, on which Macron imposed austerity spending cuts immediately prior to the pandemic, were able to treat everyone only because they admitted a fraction of the most serious cases. Most patients were told to treat themselves at home; an unknown number of older patients died in retirement homes. The current 50 percent increase in the mortality rate among French people in their homes appears to reflect the death of non-hospitalized coronavirus patients.

The lack of masks and anti-bacterial gels in France, and of gloves and coats for nurses and healthcare workers, has worsened the pandemic that has killed 119,000 people internationally and over 15,000 in France. More than 6,000 nurses have been infected in France, while seven doctors and nine health staff have died. Hundreds of doctors have filed suit against Prime Minister Édouard Philippe and former Minister of Solidarity and Health Agnès Buzyn, which threatens the two officials with two-year prison sentences.

Macron referred in passing to these disasters before minimizing them as "misfirings." With breathtaking indifference, the French president added: "We will draw all the necessary lessons in the appropriate time."

The time to secure the required supplies of medical treatments and equipment is not in the vague future, but in the here and now.

Thousands of people across Europe and elsewhere are dying every day, even as Macron announced the end of the quarantine and the reopening of all schools in less than four weeks' time, with the return of tertiary students delayed until the summer. He did not explain why elementary and secondary schools, as much key transmission mechanisms for the virus as the universities,

should reopen, besides the obvious fact that this would be necessary to allow the students' parents to get back to work and produce profits for business. Macron said that the reopening of schools would be "prepared with the social partners," the trade unions.

Nonetheless, Macron indicated that the May 11 return was not assured, criticizing the so-called strategy of "collective immunity" advocated in Berlin and London. Instead of adopting this strategy and coldly allowing a majority of the population to become infected with the disease, Macron proposed betting on a coronavirus vaccine.

"Today, according to preliminary data that will soon be improved," the president argued, "a very small minority of the French population has contracted COVID-19. This means that we are far from what specialists call collective immunity, the point at which the virus stops spreading of its own accord because enough of us have already contracted it. The most talented researchers in the world are working on this problem now—and France is internationally recognized in this field."

This raises questions to which Macron gave no answer. He stated that the development of a vaccine would take "many months"—12 to 18, according to scientists. But he was silent on what should be done between May 11 and when that vaccine might be available.

Above all, Macron did not explain his attitude toward the strategy of "collective immunity." Even assuming a mortality rate of one percent, allowing 70 percent of the population to become infected would lead to half a million deaths in France, and hundreds of millions internationally.

The fear of a social explosion in France and internationally is a decisive factor—although rarely referred to—in Macron's policy. Terrified by two years of "yellow vest" protests and shaken by stoppages in the automotive industry and at Amazon in Europe and America, he chose for the moment not to adopt openly the same quasi-genocidal policy as elsewhere on the continent.

The risk of having to re-impose a quarantine following a renewed outbreak of the virus—a possibility that he briefly referred to—no doubt played a role. Nonetheless, there is no fundamental difference between the policy of Macron and that of Boris Johnson in Britain or Angela Merkel in Germany. All want to send workers back to work, without safe conditions, in order to boost the profits of the financial elite.

Macron hypocritically sought to soften this brutal class

reality, declaring that "Our country depends entirely on men and women that our economy repays so little," before invoking the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen of 1789, "Social distinctions can be founded only on the common good." "These words," Macron continued, "are imposed upon us today," adding into the bargain that a portion of the debt of African countries would be cancelled.

Workers cannot have any confidence in these empty promises. Macron is discredited by years of austerity and war, in addition to his catastrophic response to the coronavirus pandemic. This crisis has demonstrated that social distinctions based on class inequality play a disastrous and even fatal role in the world today. Macron is known as a ruthless and bloody defender of the financial elite. He is now negotiating with the business federation and the unions to impose a slashing of paid leave and unpaid overtime.

The working class must decide the conditions for any end to the quarantine, in complete independence from the parties and unions that collaborate with Macron. Through the formation of independent rank-and-file workplace and neighborhood committees, workers can fight for a safe end to the quarantine, which would necessarily involve no return to work for non-essential production, safe conditions for all workers in industries that are essential to fight the virus and guaranteed protection of all—including prisoners and refugees.

These demands require a struggle for socialism and against capitalism and the European Union, for the bringing down of Macron and the establishment of a workers' government.



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