

French prime minister outlines end to quarantine as coronavirus deaths reach almost 20,000

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French Prime Minister Edouard Philippe and Health Minister Olivier Véran addressed a press conference last night, outlining the government's plans to end prematurely the nationwide quarantine during the coronavirus pandemic.

The press conference, which lasted more than two hours, consisted of a series of lies, evasions and self-congratulations in regard to the French government's own disastrous and criminally negligent policies.

Yesterday, another 395 COVID-19 deaths were reported across the country, bringing the total number of French dead to 19,718. Of these, 7,469 deaths have been reported in aged care homes, where the real rate of mortality is likely far higher. At least 45 percent of aged care homes have reported one or more infection among residents. More than 5,900 people remain in hospital emergency beds, in excess of the 5,000 emergency beds that were officially available prior to the outbreak.

Neither Philippe nor Véran provided any rational scientific or medical basis, during their press gathering, for the reopening of the economy on May 11 announced last Monday by President Emmanuel Macron. Having already provided hundreds of billions of euros to the corporate and financial elite to ensure that their fortunes are protected from the economic crisis triggered by the pandemic, the government is pushing—like its counterparts internationally—for a rapid return-to-work under unsafe conditions.

Philippe declared that the population would have to “learn to live with this virus.” What this means in practice is that thousands of workers will continue to die, and that this must come to be seen as a normal part of life, so that the corporations can continue to extract profits from the working class.

A large portion of Philippe's remarks were devoted to

defending the government's own reaction to the virus. The latest CEVIPOF poll for the month of April released on Saturday showed that only 39 percent of the population believed the government had “managed this crisis well.” The website Gala cited an unnamed ministry adviser on Friday stating that “there will be a *dégagiste* [demanding the downfall of the government] movement after the crisis. It's the end of all of us.” The term *dégager* [resign] was a main slogan of the Tunisian revolution of 2011.

In one characteristic lie, for example, Philippe stated that the government had maintained 107 million protective masks in stock prior to the pandemic, and that this would be sufficient to supply the health system for 20 weeks under normal conditions. He did not specify that these were virtually all lower-grade masks not designed for use by medical personnel, but only suitable for the general population to prevent the spread of an illness.

In 2009, the government had maintained in stock over 460 million higher-grade FFP2 masks, designed for use by medical professionals, which the government had calculated would suffice for 90 days in the midst of an epidemic. In 2011, the Sarkozy government cancelled the programme of maintaining FFP2 mask stocks completely, as part of the drive by the political establishment to slash health care spending. By the time the first coronavirus cases were detected in France, the government had no centralized stock of FFP2 masks.

The government has provided few details about how it intends to end the quarantine, and Philippe stated that the details were still being worked out and would only be revealed some time in the next two weeks.

Health Minister Véran announced that beginning today, limited visits of no more than two people at a time, will be permitted in aged care homes and facilities for the disabled and without any physical contact.

Beginning on May 11, schools will reopen, though possibly not all at once. Philippe raised the possibility that they will be reopened progressively by region, or that half the students will attend classes in one week, and half the other.

The reopening of schools has been widely opposed by health care professionals and by teachers on social media. Philip Klein, a French doctor preparing to return from Wuhan, where he has worked through the pandemic, told *Europe 1*, “In the case of an end to quarantine ... the last thing you should do is reopen schools.” Klein stated that children are “often asymptomatic carriers and are therefore transporters of the epidemic,” and reopening schools too quickly would be “an enormous risk.”

From the standpoint of the ruling class, however, the reopening of schools is a necessity in order to allow employees to return to work.

Philippe reported that the reproduction rate of the infection had been reduced to 0.65 during the quarantine, meaning that every 100 people with the disease infect, on average, another 65 people. The aim of the measures put in place after the quarantine would be to maintain this rate “at or below one.”

However, the government has not provided any scientific basis for the claim that an end to confinement will not lead to an immediate and catastrophic resurgence of the pandemic’s spread. The total number of cases across France remains unknown. Official policy remains testing only those most at risk. GP clinics are unable to carry out tests, and people who present COVID-19 symptoms, unless they have already developed respiratory difficulties, are told to go home. V  ran claimed the government would seek to increase the total number of tests from 125,000 per week to 500,000 by May 11.

Despite the full support of the media, the end to quarantine remains opposed by the majority of the French population, which does not wish to be forced back to work in order to allow the spread of the disease to kill themselves and their family members. The most recent Yougov poll for the Huffington Post showed that 51 percent of the population still supported total confinement, with over 80 percent believing the government should have imposed confinement earlier.

The Macron government is seeking to utilize the economic pressure on the working class caused by its own refusal to provide adequate support throughout the pandemic as a cudgel to drive people back to work—this despite the fact that the conditions of the pandemic have only deepened the conditions of social inequality and

poverty.

On Wednesday, hundreds of people waited in a line for a free food distribution run by a private charity in the Saint-Denis suburbs north of Paris—some arriving at 8:00 a.m., three hours before the beginning of the distribution, to secure their place.

The charity had run three food distributions in the previous eight days; the first was attended by 190 people, the second by 490 and the third by 750. Several workers spoke to *Le Monde*, including a 42-year-old nurse’s assistant and single mother with three children, who could not afford to provide food for her children during the confinement. A restaurant worker and father of seven children receiving state unemployment benefits, said his payments did not cover the cost of food for his children, who normally eat at the school canteen under state-subsidized programmes for €1 per day: “My children are hungry the whole day and what I receive is not enough.”

The alternative presented by the government, however, between a prolonged continuation of quarantine in deepening poverty, and a return to work in unsafe conditions, is a false one. The real alternative is a massive mobilization of public resources and organization of production to provide vital medical equipment and safe conditions for health workers and employees involved in essential production, and maintain quarantine for the rest of the population, with decent living conditions. Such a policy could only be carried out through the mass mobilization of the working class to expropriate the ill-gotten wealth of the financial oligarchy and rationally allocate the wealth of society in the fight against the pandemic.



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