# Prime Minister Philippe announces premature end of the lockdown in France

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Tuesday afternoon, in the wake of last week's announcement by the European Union (EU) of a general policy of ending the coronavirus lockdown, Prime Minister Édouard Philippe presented his project for the end of the lockdown in France in the National Assembly. The plan proposes to reopen schools on May 11 and an overall return to normal in workplaces not essential to the fight against the disease. The Assembly voted 368 to 100 in favour of the plan, with 103 abstentions.

The end of the lockdown announced throughout Europe and in France in particular is premature and will have disastrous consequences. China lifted the containment of Wuhan, the first epicentre of the COVID-19 virus, on April 8, two and a half months after the start of that city's lockdown—and when no more new cases were recorded there. France has waited only six weeks to lift the containment. Some 23,785 new cases were recorded yesterday in Europe, including 2,638 in France, and the epidemic is not at all under control on the continent.

Given the virulence of COVID-19, scientists warn that the end of strict health measures will result in an outbreak of new infections. German virologist Christian Drosten has given interviews to the British and Belgian press to warn of the danger of a new epidemic overwhelming already overcrowded hospitals. "I regret what has been happening in the last few days. We are on the verge of losing our lead over the disease completely," said Drosten, who regretted the "political and economic pressure to return to normal."

Drosten added, "I'm afraid the breeding rate will increase again, and we'll be facing a second wave. ... Tanker trucks full of disinfectant will be on the streets, as this will be the only desperate measure [able] to fight the virus."

These fears are confirmed by the analysis of biostatistician Chloé Dimeglio, from the laboratory of the University Hospital of Toulouse, based on a model of the pandemic. She says the containment has saved more than 100,000 lives in France: "At present, we count about 22,000 deaths. First, we compared the actual mortality to that obtained through our model, they are comparable. So, we looked at what the model would have given if there had been no containment. According to our model, we avoided more than 100,000 more deaths."

Andrea Ammon, the director of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control in Solna, Sweden, told *El Pais*: "I know that in January, when the Chinese locked down Wuhan and the surrounding towns, I was told that it would be impossible in Europe. At that time, we had 20 cases. At that time, if we had introduced tough control measures, we would not have stopped the spread of the disease, but the peak would have been much lower."

In his presentation, Prime Minister Philippe brushed aside these warnings to insist on a rapid return to work. While admitting he was launching "an end to the lockdown that is as expected as it is risky," and that "collective immunity is not enough," he claimed that "the prolonged halt in the production of entire sections of our economy" presented France with the "risk of collapse."

In fact, if the lockdown has caused difficulties for workers, it is because of the reactionary policy of the EU, and the inaction and lies of the French government. The EU and the European Central Bank have given €2,290 billion [US$2.49 billion] to the recovery plans, but as after the 2008 crash, they want to give almost all of this money to the banks, while workers and small businesses receive little or nothing, and temporary

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workers go hungry. As for the Emmanuel Macron government, it has long covered up the shortage of masks due to its refusal to order them before the pandemic and its claim that COVID-19 was just another flu.

The lockdown itself, which was endorsed by workers in mid-March, was adopted only in the face of an international wave of wildcat strikes and walkouts, especially in Italy and the United States. Now the governments, and behind them the financial aristocracy, which is being showered with public funds by the EU, are hoping to force people back to work in the midst of the pandemic, with no regard for human lives.

Philippe insisted that at the end of containment the virus would still be present: “We will have to live with the virus ... it’s not a good thing but it’s a fact.” He announced a strategy based on the three-part plan, “Protect, test, isolate.” Each element of this plan is a political fraud.

For protection, Philippe said that “wearing a mask in certain situations” would be added to the usual “barrier gestures” to limit the spread of the virus. But the government has been saying since the beginning of the pandemic that wearing a mask was not useful—essentially because it had allowed strategic stocks of masks to run out in order to make possible its tax gifts to the rich. Now, it is proposing that individuals make their own cloth masks, which do not guarantee an optimal obstacle to the virus, because the more efficient FFP2 masks are not accessible.

Philippe had the dishonesty to say that his government had screened massively at the beginning of the epidemic when the very first cases occurred. In fact, France is one of the countries that has detected the least: 7,103 tests per million inhabitants, 2.5 times less than the USA and more than 4 times less than Spain, Italy and Germany. Macron disregarded the WHO’s urgent calls for mass screening of the population. But a screening strategy—now possible thanks to the mobilization of public laboratories demanding the government authorize them to perform testing—is useless if it does not go hand in hand with a strategy to isolate and treat the cases that are discovered.

It will be next to impossible to organise the isolation of patients and new cases in view of the government’s plans. While admitting that the French are afraid to take public transport, Philippe claimed it would be possible to enforce prevention measures. But if the government organises a return to work, the rush to use transport will make any attempt to maintain the minimum distance of two metres between passengers meaningless.

According to Philippe, those who test positive for COVID-19 will have to choose between being isolated at home, “which will result in the confinement of the entire household for 14 days, for obvious reasons,” or in a place made available to them, such as a hotel requisitioned by the government.

Having admitted that the children are spreading the virus, the government will nonetheless reopen schools starting May 11. According to Philippe, “the reopening will be gradual from May 11, on a voluntary basis throughout the country. Classes will have a maximum of 15 pupils, and several health measures will be put in place, including the provision of hydro-alcoholic gel. The crèches will also be reopened with groups of up to 10 children.” All shops, except restaurants and cafes, will also be allowed to reopen on May 11.

Philippe again stressed that his policy was closely coordinated with the trade unions.

Workers cannot trust the policy of the government and the union apparatuses, which is made up of repression, lies and gifts to the rich. In order to give themselves the best chance of avoiding a second epidemic wave, workers must see to it that containment is extended. But this requires a political mobilisation to expropriate the vast sums of money stolen by the EU to finance the banks and turn them into the financial, food and medical aid needed to make containment tolerable for workers and small businesses.

This requires first of all the organisation of workers, independently of the unions, to exercise their right to walk out on a massive scale to avoid situations where they are forced to work in conditions that will spread the disease.

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