

Macron unleashes riot police against French health care protests

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Yesterday thousands of doctors, nurses, paramedics, health care assistants, medical laboratory technicians and other health care professionals joined a nationwide demonstration across France to demand increased health care funding amidst the global coronavirus pandemic.

Several thousand workers protested outside the national health ministry offices in Paris. There were other major demonstrations of hundreds or thousands of people in many cities, and more than 220 separate protests outside local hospitals by staff.

In Paris, the Macron government ordered a massive deployment of riot police. At approximately 5:00 p.m., riot police violently attacked groups of protesters, firing tear gas on the protest near the Invalides.

Twitter videos show police arresting the same health care workers who only weeks earlier were being self-servingly hailed by the government for their sacrifice in protecting the population against the pandemic. In another video, police can be seen pushing a worker in a white hospital coat face down into the ground as she kneels and demands her ventolin asthma medication, before taking her away with her face bleeding.

The police crackdown shows that the Macron administration and the financial elite will violently repress opposition to its plans to use the pandemic to implement a massive transfer of wealth from the working class to itself.

In his televised address on Sunday announcing the end to all confinement measures, Macron declared that the government will not impose any taxes on corporations to pay off €500 billion in state debt incurred during the pandemic. Of this, almost four-fifths were allocated to guarantee corporate debts. This money is to be paid through savage austerity against the working class.

Macron is due to announce a new attack on health care before the end of the month. This has been fraudulently presented as a progressive reform. Macron was forced to pledge a wage increase for nurses under conditions of massive support in the population for their demands and opposition to the slashing of health care funding over decades by successive governments.

However, it is already clear that whatever limited wage increases are provided will be more than made up for with sharp attacks across the health care sector. Health Minister Olivier Véran announced on May 20 that the government would increase wages for nurses, but that this would be tied to “placing in question certain straitjackets that prevent those who want to work longer from doing so,” meaning an end to the 35-hour work week. The French health care system did not “perform” sufficiently well, he added.

Prime Minister Édouard Philippe declared that there could be “no taboos.”

The Macron administration and its former health minister Agnes Buzyn had already introduced legislation mandating major health care funding cuts into the parliament in the months before the coronavirus pandemic. These triggered rolling protests and wildcat actions throughout the summer of 2019 up until the pandemic.

Today, *Le Monde* reported that the national health insurance system faced a deficit of €31 billion, which will be used as a justification for deeper cuts. The Macron administration is meeting throughout the month with the trade unions, who are seeking to demobilize and isolate opposition among the health care workers.

Those who attended yesterday’s protest described the impact of decades of funding cuts on the health care system that have been laid bare by the pandemic. In the

last six years alone, spanning both the Macron administration and the former Socialist Party government of Francois Hollande, more than 17,500 overstay hospital beds were closed.

“What we are demanding here today is the same thing we have been demanding since before the coronavirus pandemic,” said Jessica, who has worked as a nurse’s assistant for 13 years in a public hospital in Paris. “We do not have the materials we need. There are not enough staff. When staff leave, they are not replaced. Our maternity leave is not actually provided. Wages are not enough. All of this existed before but had been allowed to happen behind the scenes and was only exposed by the crisis.

“There are no safe conditions. There are staff who are assaulted in the wards by patients because there are not safe working conditions. There are health staff who have died from the coronavirus. We are not protected.”

Amissa, who came to the protest with Jessica and conducts home visits as a nurse’s assistant, added, “We were already fed up. Now we want there to be a change. We don’t want just a ‘thank you’ and the ‘applause.’” For health workers who conduct home visits, she said, nothing was provided in the height of the pandemic. “Normally we are the ones who have to supply our own materials. We had our own reserves of masks and some of our patients even had to give us masks. Then we depended on networks of colleagues.”

Jessica concluded: “There is always money when the government needs it. They have given billions to bail out Air France, Renault.” The rich “know that they have the means to buy their own health care,” Samira said, “and that they will be treated in any case.”

Aurélia, a laboratory technician laboratory at the Poincaré hospital in Paris, has worked in the hospital system for 22 years. “Our laboratory was focused on the coronavirus,” she said, “and we had 90 patients at the hospital in intensive care.” In the laboratory, “there were practically no masks. We were allowed to take a single mask at a time and the number we took was noted down. There were not enough blouses, not enough staff. We also lacked gloves. Even the swabs used for testing had previously come from Italy and we did not have enough.”

“Since the health care reforms introduced by Sarkozy,” she added, “we are provided a fixed amount of money for every type of operation we perform. That

means if a patient requires more treatment, we bear the cost of the difference. The private hospitals take who they want to treat.”

She said she thought that “the Macron government has no intention of increasing spending. They have given us little crumbs—a one-off bonus of €1,000. They see patients as clients and not as patients.” She said that the money should be taken from the rich, “possibly via some other form of wealth tax,” to pay for increases in the hospital system. Commenting on Macron’s declaration that there would be no tax increases, she added, “Every time it is us who are forced to pay, the middle classes and the poor.”

In his speech on Sunday, during which he projected mass bankruptcies and layoffs of workers, Macron declared that he would continue to collaborate with the trade union “social partners,” which are working to suppress, isolate and demobilize the growing anger in the working class. Health care workers must strike out on a new road and take the conduct of this fight into their own hands, by forming independent workplace committees controlled directly by rank-and-file staff, and to make a direct appeal to other sections of the working class in France and internationally for a united struggle.

The response of the Macron administration to the just demands of the workers shows that the only answer of the ruling class to popular opposition is state repression. The struggle against the pandemic today and the guaranteeing of high-quality health care to all requires a revolutionary program, based on the fight for a workers government, the confiscation of the ill-gotten wealth of the financial elite, and the socialist reorganization of society.



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