

French trade unions agree to attacks on healthcare system amid coronavirus pandemic

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13 July 2020

On Friday, amid the accelerating deadly coronavirus pandemic, the French trade unions and the Macron administration announced a new healthcare agreement that will erode conditions for hospital and other healthcare workers, and do nothing to address the catastrophic conditions in hospitals exposed by the virus.

The full contents of the agreements have not yet been published, but even those details published by the media make clear that it is a major assault on healthcare. They include:

- **A further ending of restrictions on the 35-hour work week for nurses.** According to the financial daily *Les Echos*, the agreement stipulates “the possibility of individual contracts for completing an annual quota of supplementary hours” on top of the 35-hour week. The federal secretary of the General Federation of Labour (CGT), Patrick Bourdillon, was forced to admit that these “additional hours will be paid, but we do not have the details of how much. We are therefore being asked to sign a blank check to end the 35-hour week.” While loopholes already existed on the 35-hour week, these are to be further expanded, enabling hospital management to “use this more often,” according to *Les Echos*. The newspaper hailed the agreement for “permitting reorganizations at the hospital, giving management room to maneuver ... and thus increasing overall productivity.”

- **No pledge for reopening beds.** In the last six years, 17,500 overstay hospital beds have been closed in France due to continuous cuts to hospital budgets. Of these, almost one quarter were closed in 2017-18. Over the past 20 years, more than 100,000 beds have been closed. The agreement includes no pledge for hospital funding to reverse the impact of this bipartisan decadeslong assault.

- **A negligible increase in hospital staff.** The agreement includes a pledge to increase the number of nurse positions by 7,500. This amounts to a drop in the ocean, approximately one or two additional nurses per facility. Moreover, half of these positions had already been allocated within the existing budgets of hospitals but had not been filled because of the atrocious conditions for nurses.

- **An inadequate pay rise for nurses of 180 euros per month.** This is just over half the 300 euros that the trade unions had claimed was their central demand in advance of the negotiations. Nurses will not see any increase until September, and the full wage rise will not come into force until March next year. This follows decades of real wage cuts for nurses and other healthcare staff.

The total funding budgeted toward nurses and retirement home staff comes to €7.5 billion, and an additional €450 million for doctors. This is roughly two percent of the almost €400 billion that the Macron administration pledged to guarantee the loans of French banks and corporations as it imposed a lockdown in March. Moreover, as further details of the agreement continue to emerge, there will no doubt be even more far-reaching attacks revealed.

Nonetheless, three trade union federations, the French Democratic Labor Confederation (CFDT), National Union of Autonomous Unions (UNSA), and Workers Force (FO), declared that the deal for nurses represented a great victory and that they would sign it tomorrow. It would therefore pass, since the combined vote these federations received in the last union elections was just over 50 percent, and they therefore claim to represent half the workforce.

This has enabled the CGT to play its assigned role of fraudulently criticizing elements of the agreement,

while committing it to nothing. The CGT is itself seeking to demobilize widespread opposition among nurses and healthcare workers to the agreement. While the media has claimed that the CGT is opposed to the agreement, this is false. On Thursday evening, it published a video by Mireille Stivala, the general secretary of the Federation of Health and Social Work (FSAS). Stivala said the agreement crossed a number of the union's "red lines," but concluded that the union may still vote for it anyway.

The union would prepare a report for members on the deal "so that the point of support for the signature or the nonsignature of the agreement comes from the base and the workers. Even if the agreement may be disappointing, we have to acknowledge all the same that it's thanks to the mobilisation of staff over recent years, and thanks to the trade unions, that we've been able to [obtain] ... this wage increase." She concluded absurdly by calling on workers to join a national protest on the national holiday of Bastille Day on July 14 to call for improvements in workers' conditions that the unions and the government are in the process of tearing up.

The agreement underscores certain definite social realities. The systematic assault on the hospital system in France and internationally over decades has not been the result of mistaken policies or a lack of understanding of the importance of the healthcare system for society. In the midst of the greatest pandemic in a century, in which over 30,000 have been killed in France and 568,000 around the world, the response of the ruling class and its political and trade union representatives is to further trash the public healthcare system.

As far as the capitalist class is concerned, if more workers die, and particularly the elderly who are no longer able to produce profits for employers, this is not only unimportant, but can be a positive good, as it will reduce spending on both healthcare and pensions. The slashing of social spending is necessary to fund the massive transfer of wealth from the working class to the rich that has been accelerated throughout the pandemic. And the rich will continue to enjoy the best quality healthcare that money can buy. That is why governments internationally are maintaining their return-to-work policy, ensuring that corporate profit-making activities can be resumed despite the threat to

millions.

It would be the greatest mistake for healthcare workers to believe that the latest sellout can be reversed through the placing of pressure on the trade union leaders, as is put forward by the recently-formed Inter-Urgences trade union. It is not merely a matter of corrupt individuals, though that is in great supply. Under conditions of globalized production, the corporatist and nationalist program of the trade unions in every country has transformed them into the open agents of corporate management and governments, tasked with suppressing opposition among workers and increasing profits.

Healthcare workers must instead break free from the corporatist grip of the union apparatuses and form their own independent organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, organized by workers themselves. An appeal must be made for the development of a unified industrial and political offensive of the working class internationally. This must be tied to a socialist program, for the taking of political power by the working class internationally, and the reorganization of society on a socialist basis. The coronavirus pandemic has made clear that the capitalist class is in a war against society. The fight against the pandemic means a war against capitalism and the fight for socialism.



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