

As COVID-19 floods hospitals, Macron debates second lockdown in France

Alex Lantier**27 October 2020**

French President Emmanuel Macron is to give a national televised address this evening to announce new policies as the pandemic erupts out of control in France and across Europe.

Health authorities are warning that without immediate, decisive action, the onrush of patients will first flood and then overwhelm France's medical system. Europe is recording at least 200,000 new cases each day, with France among the worst-hit at 30,000 to 50,000 new cases per day. Moreover, these numbers are doubling every 10 days. Already, 2,900 of France's 5,800 ventilator-equipped beds are currently occupied by COVID-19 patients. Daily deaths from the virus are also rising sharply, with 2,693 deaths across Europe yesterday, including 523 in France alone.

Together with other European countries like Spain, Belgium and the Czech Republic, France is one of the first countries passing through what is a global upsurge of COVID-19. While daily new cases worldwide oscillated from 200,000 to 300,000 from July to early October, they have this month exploded to nearly 500,000.

Even though the World Health Organization (WHO) warned three months ago that the premature ending of lockdowns in spring was leading to a resurgence of the virus in Europe, the Macron administration and other European governments opposed implementing a shelter-at-home order. As millions contract the highly contagious and deadly virus, they still refuse to allow non-essential workers and youth to shelter at home.

Amid mounting public concern and anger at the upsurge of the virus, Macron held a meeting of France's national security council from 10 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. yesterday, after which Prime Minister Jean Castex met with the leaders of France's main parliamentary parties. Macron will hold another

national security council meeting before speaking tonight.

Leading doctors have given interviews on major media in recent days to warn of the imminent collapse of the country's health system in a surge of COVID-19 infections and deaths even more devastating than in the spring.

Professor Gilles Pialoux, the head of the infectious diseases section at Tenon hospital in Paris, told BFM-TV "this is a war situation" and that he "unambiguously calls for a shelter-at-home order." He warned of a "more rapid, more critical and stronger second wave" than the earlier spike in deaths during the spring. "We probably lost control of the spread of virus as early as August," he said.

Pialoux bluntly criticized those, such as the Macron government itself, who claim that a general shelter-at-home order is economically impossible, saying: "You can bring back the economy, but you can't bring back someone who did not get access to life support."

Pialoux's statements were echoed by Eric Caulmes, the head of the infectious diseases section of the Pitié-Salpêtrière hospital in Paris, after the emergency meeting yesterday. "The virus is so widespread among us that now, I think today we have no choice. We will have to give a new confinement order," Caulmes told France Info. "We lost control of the epidemic some weeks ago. The prime minister recognized this, the health minister also."

Caulmes criticized Macron's current 9 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew measure as "a risky bet," adding: "From an epidemiological point of view, this is not a method whose effectiveness is well established." He also criticized the government's "telling people to stop working from home in September, I think that was a mistake. We need to work from home as much as

possible. It is a weapon in the struggle against the pandemic.”

Caulmes warned that the explosive rise in cases threatens to swamp hospitals: “Soon we will only have COVID-19 patients in ventilator beds, we will no longer be able to handle other patients if the medical system is overrun with COVID-19. And one should recall that the longer one waits to take the right decisions, the longer they take to show effects.”

The resurgence of the virus is the product of the politically criminal subordination of health policy to the profit interests of the financial aristocracy by capitalist governments around the world. The European Union (EU) reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic by passing an unprecedented €2 trillion in bank and corporate bailouts. However, only a tiny fraction of these public funds went to fund miserly unemployment insurance programs and loan programs for small businesses.

Instead, the banks demanded youth return to school so their parents could return to work, to produce profits on the massive riches that the ruling class had taken from the public purse. Governments advocated criminally irresponsible policies—like going to the workplace even when this was not strictly necessary, as Caulmes mentioned—in an attempt to lull workers to sleep with a false sense of security. As a result, COVID-19 has spread widely.

Broad sections of the ruling class still cling to this tissue of murderous lies. Yesterday evening, French media outlets floated possibilities for the measures Macron might propose tonight, all of them insufficient to halt the contagion. These included a shelter-at-home order on weekends combined with a nighttime curfew, a shelter-at-home order in a few of the worst-hit cities, or a four-week national lock-down in which elementary and junior high schools would remain open, so parents could keep going to work.

These measures have one feature in common: they all force workers and youth to keep reporting to work and school, where two-thirds of COVID-19 transmission clusters occur. Thus, they ensure profits will continue pumping into the pockets of the financial aristocracy, by ensuring the virus continues to spread among working people.

The president of the French Business Federation (Medef), Geoffroy Roux de Bézieux, told RMC that France cannot afford a shelter-at-home order as in the

spring. “If we do a total lockdown as in March, it won’t be a 10 percent fall in the economy, it will simply collapse,” he said.

There is no reason to be particularly interested in what Mr Roux de Bézieux believes he can or cannot afford. The funds needed to protect the health system and allow workers, the self-employed and small businessmen to shelter at home until the pandemic is under control should be taken from the vast sums of public wealth that EU authorities have illegitimately given to the super-rich. The survival of hundreds of thousands or millions of people cannot be subordinated to the selfish interests of a parasitic ruling class that has outlived itself and is no longer fit to rule.

The only way to halt the devastating resurgence of COVID-19 is a general shelter-at-home order for all youth and non-essential workers until responsible medical authorities judge the pandemic is under control.

Workers cannot however rely on capitalist politicians like Macron, a former investment banker, or on the negotiations between Roux de Bézieux and France’s bought-and-paid-for union bureaucracy to obtain such a policy. Regardless of what Macron decides today, he will seek to defend the same fundamental class interests, which are inimical to the health and lives of the broad majority of the population. The lockdown this spring, it must be recalled, left millions of workers and small businessmen without financial protection or, in many cases, sufficient food.

The only way forward, as the Parti de l’égalité socialiste and its sister parties of the International Committee of the Fourth International have explained, is the organization of the working class and youth independently of the union bureaucracies and the preparation of general strike action. Such a struggle, waged on an international basis in order to transfer power to the working class and seize the necessary financial and industrial resources to implement a scientifically-based policy against COVID-19, is the only way to stop the pandemic.



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