

French government rejects lockdown as COVID-19 deaths sweep Europe

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On Thursday, French Prime Minister Jean Castex and Health Minister Olivier Véran unveiled health measures decided by President Emmanuel Macron at a national security meeting the day before.

There is overwhelming public support for a full lockdown to stop the hurricane of COVID-19 deaths sweeping across Europe. An Elabe poll found 83 percent of French people expected a lockdown, and 75 percent preferred a lockdown to a 6 p.m. evening curfew. Despite the torrent of media propaganda opposing a lockdown as a threat to corporate profits, 52 percent preferred a nationwide to several regional lockdowns.

Nonetheless, trampling upon public opinion, the government decided to only impose a nationwide 6 p.m. curfew, keeping open schools and nonessential industries. With Health Ministry statistics showing that two-thirds of COVID-19 transmission occurs in schools and workplaces, this guarantees that mass infections will escalate—even as the far more contagious British variant of the coronavirus spreads across Europe.

The policies of the European Union (EU) and of Macron, endorsed by union bureaucracies who signed to approve multitrillion-euro bank and corporate bailouts, are politically criminal. It is ever more apparent to masses of working people that their lives count for nothing in Macron's calculations. Only independent action by the working class can impose a scientifically grounded policy to stop the pandemic.

At the conference, Castex began, "We are today a bit above 15,000 daily cases, that is three times the goal of 5,000 daily infections we had set ourselves." He also reported "2,500 daily admissions to hospital" due to COVID-19. He said the situation in France is better than in several neighboring states—including Britain, which is devastated by the new strain, and Germany,

which now sees over 1,000 daily deaths, compared to around 400 in France.

In fact, what is taking place is an international catastrophe. Europe this week passed the mark of 600,000 COVID-19 deaths, after seeing the 300,000 mark reached on November 12, 400,000 on November 28 and 500,000 on December 22. With approximately 100,000 people dying in Europe every three weeks, the number of deaths in Europe could easily reach one million this winter. Even if the pandemic did not accelerate in France, it would see nearly a half million cases, 75,000 hospitalizations, and 12,000 deaths in January alone.

Nevertheless, Professor Jean-François Delfraissy, who heads the National Scientific Council, insisted, "We are not in an extreme emergency situation." While noting that there would be "three difficult months" and that the situation would only improve "after the summer," Delfraissy opposed a lockdown. "We recommend continuing the return to school. We think that data on the spread of the English virus are not clear enough to push us to close the schools."

Castex and Véran therefore insisted that—while keeping sites like restaurants, bars, gyms, and artistic venues closed—schools and nonessential industrial production should stay open. Castex in effect argued that halting the virus is less important than vaccinations: "We can now count on a more powerful weapon, the vaccine, which is our main source of hope to exit from this crisis."

Vaccination in France is disastrously slow, however. The Macron government became a global laughingstock when it emerged that only 5,000 people had been vaccinated in France by January 6. Castex hailed this delay—due to focusing vaccinations on rest homes and imposing a lengthy procedure to obtain

consent, ostensibly to respect elderly residents with dementia—as a “choice to respect the principles and priorities set by the National Health Authority.”

While admitting to “not having today’s figures” on vaccinations, Véran pledged, “We are aiming for one million people vaccinated by the end of January.” He said vaccines would be made available to all those over age 75. However, even if the Macron government attains this pace, this still means that around 66 million people in France would not be vaccinated and would still be at risk.

Based on this contempt for public well-being, Castex rejected a lockdown: “Throughout the country, a curfew will go into effect starting at 6 p.m. on Saturday, for at least 15 days... This aims to further reduce social contact at night but allow continued economic activity, education and movements during the day.”

Castex made clear that he would not allow school closures, as this would disrupt the economy by keeping parents from working. With schools fully open, he said universities will reopen to first-year students for smaller classes, and then gradually to the entire student body. He said: “The closure of schools can be considered only in the last extremity. I know certain countries did this. My position is that, in effect, the health situation must be very serious to close schools, as we know the consequences—including health consequences—of closing schools are horrific.”

The Macron regime’s staggering indifference to mass deaths testifies to an increasingly fascistic character. While Castex claims the situation is not “very serious,” and Delfraissy denies there is “extreme emergency,” over 100,000 people die each month in Europe of COVID-19.

The government’s argument that the British variant of the coronavirus does not pose enough of a threat to take serious action is a lie contradicted by scientists. Already, they estimate that around two percent of infections in France are from the new variant, which is 50-70 percent more contagious and has led to a surge of deaths in Britain. This proportion rises to six percent in the Paris area, five percent in the Marseille region, and three percent in the Lyon region.

Epidemiologist Vittoria Colizza bluntly said, “We will need stricter measures.” She explained: “The situation will very rapidly become quite critical. As this

variant is more contagious, it could become dominant by March... We must act starting now, because by then the incidence will be extremely high and the circulation of the virus will be far harder to control.”

Epidemiologist Pascal Crépey said, “There is the impression that the epidemic is under control, but the British variant will change that.” Calling for 100,000 vaccinations per day—three times the speed Véran proposed—he added, “The campaign really must speed up... If there are supply problems, we should vaccinate until we run out. Vaccines are more effective in patients’ arms than in refrigerators.”

Averting an even greater disaster requires the political mobilization of the working class. Mass wildcat strikes spreading from Italy across Spain, France, Britain and beyond in the spring of 2020 imposed lockdowns that nearly stopped transmission of the virus. However, the premature exit from lockdowns in May—after which EU governments set up no effective system to identify, test and trace contacts for COVID-19 cases—allowed for its mass resurgence.

At that time, EU states insisted that lockdowns’ economic cost was too high, citing the impact on small business. This has been exposed as a fraud, aiming to give a false veneer of popularity to a policy of enriching the financial aristocracy. To keep COVID-19 from totally swamping hospitals, the state has closed small businesses while nonessential industrial production was kept open to pump profits to the banks and major corporations, who received €2 trillion in EU bailouts.

Halting the resurgence of the virus requires the formation of independent, rank-and-file safety committees in workplaces and schools, independent of the unions, and the building of an international political movement in the working class for socialism. Power, including the power to determine health policy, must go from a bankrupt and failed ruling elite to the working class, so that the full resources of society can be used to address critical social needs like stopping the pandemic.



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