

French government rejects a new lockdown to stop coronavirus spread

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On Friday evening, after a week of press reports suggesting French President Emmanuel Macron was likely to announce a lockdown, Macron sent Prime Minister Jean Castex to announce on television that there would be no lockdown. But health officials are adamant that the spread of the more contagious British variant is accelerating, and only a lockdown can stop a massive wave of deaths.

Like his counterparts across Europe, Macron is making the politically criminal choice to sacrifice masses of lives to increase the wealth of the super-rich. This weekend, the number of COVID-19 deaths officially recorded in Europe exceeded 700,000. Of these, more than 76,000 occurred in France. More than 100,000 people are dying every three weeks in Europe.

With blatant indifference to the loss of human life, Castex gave a 15-minute speech in which he concluded: “Our duty is to do everything possible to avoid a new lockdown, and the next few days will be decisive.” Castex declared that the question of a lockdown “is legitimately raised,” but that he dismissed it in view of “its very heavy impact on the French in all areas.”

He detailed additional measures that leave the government’s health strategy essentially unchanged, organized around a nationwide 6 p.m. curfew, the prohibition of entry from or leaving to outside the European Union, the obligation to conduct tests at national borders, the closure of large shopping centres of more than 20,000 square meters, and increased patrols by police to enforce the curfew.

With approximately 23,000 new cases and 500 new deaths of COVID-19 per day in France, even before the British variant had established itself as the dominant strain, these measures would not prevent a vast increase in contagion.

Even official government statements confirm that its

policy will have no significant impact. “The curfew has an impact, but it is not enough in the face of the variants,” Health Minister Olivier Véran said at a press conference on January 28, two days before Castex’s speech. He admitted that transmission in schools and workplaces, which accounts for two-thirds of clusters, plays a huge role: “There is a contamination that is difficult to avoid, contamination in the family. There are contaminations linked to professional practice.”

Doctors have denounced the policy announced by Castex. “It is obvious that it will not help to restore the health situation,” said Djillali Annane, head of the intensive care unit of the Poincaré Hospital in Garches. “If we only count on this measure there and the partial closure of borders to re-control the epidemic with in 10 days, with the period of school vacations, it is a very risky and daring bet.”

Similarly, the professor of infectious disease, Anne-Claude Crémieux said: “The moment when the increase will be very rapid is approaching. Containment is therefore still very likely.” Noting the few countries “that have almost eliminated the virus” such as Vietnam, Taiwan and China, she added that this requires a decision “to eliminate the virus at the price of economic sacrifices.” However, she made it clear that in France and Europe, the political power had made the opposite choice, to let the virus spread.

To stop the virus, she added, the attacks on the health system, which have been carried out for decades, should be stopped: “First, a strict and long containment should be imposed, and then a very effective policy of isolation and tracing for sources of contamination should be put in place. But we would need an army of public health professionals in the field, which we no longer have, and it would take months and the means to rebuild it.”

It is obvious to growing numbers of workers and young people that the Macron government and the European Union, in their hostility to a serious fight against the virus, have no viable strategy to end the pandemic. While there are huge delays in the delivery of vaccines, whose effectiveness against the new strains is now unknown, containment is more essential than ever. But a policy of defending lives is incompatible with the capitalist system and the class interests of the financial aristocracy that Macron defends.

His arguments, that non-essential economic activity must continue at the cost of lives and continued contagion to assist small businesses, are nonsensical. The state has no real prospect of reopening most of the businesses—cafés, restaurants, sports halls, concert halls, etc.—that it has closed to avoid overwhelming intensive care units. It is maintaining non-essential work and face-to-face schooling, not to help the economy, but so that the profits continue to accumulate in the banks and for the largest companies.

Even if one took the morally and politically indefensible view that the only important variable is financial wealth, a strict health policy would collectively be more profitable than the collective immunity policy pursued by Macron and the EU. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of France (3.2 million cases, 76,000 deaths) has fallen by 8.3 percent and that of Germany (2.2 million cases, 58,000 deaths) by 5 percent in 2020. Taiwan's (911 cases, 8 deaths) increased by 2.5 percent, China's (89,522 cases, 4,636 deaths) by 2.3 percent.

Macron's goal is not to save the economy, but to continue the transfer of wealth to the financial aristocracy, organized by the European Union/European Central Bank stimulus packages of more than €2 trillion. The only important issue, from the government's point of view, is the impact this will have on corporate profit.

The *Journal du dimanche*, which devoted its issue yesterday to Macron's announcement, noted: "One last argument weighed heavily" on the government decision: "the economic bill, estimated by the finance ministry at €25 billion for a month and a half of lockdown. 'We have to find another option,' pleaded Economy Minister Bruno Le Maire to Macron."

The president of the French employers' association (MEDEF), Geoffroy Roux de Bézieux, confirmed that

the pleas of Le Maire were pushed by MEDEF itself. "We have constantly exchanged with Bruno Le Maire and his teams. We are all aware that a simple solution to the health crisis does not exist. But businessmen would be indignant at the return of a solution identical to that of March," i.e., a lockdown that would stop in-person schooling and non-essential production in order to stop the transmission of the virus.

The MEDEF has received support in this matter from the trade union apparatuses and middle-class pseudo-left parties, such as the New Anti-Capitalist Party, which support the economic bailout plans and call for the reopening of universities and the economy as a whole.

However, the €25 billion that would be needed to finance a lockdown represents less than the profits that Bernard Arnault was able to add to his wealth *in 2020 alone*. His wealth has grown from \$73 billion to more than €100 billion (\$121 billion) thanks to the government bailouts, financed at the expense of the working population.

The only way to stop the pandemic is to expropriate the billionaire parasites growing their fortunes through the deaths of workers. This requires the organization of workers and youth in workplaces and schools in rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the trade union apparatuses that are tied to the capitalist states, and the struggle to create an international socialist movement to transfer power to the working class.



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