

France announces inadequate lockdown measures as coronavirus spreads

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Yesterday evening, in a nationally televised address, French Prime Minister Jean Castex announced a set of limited and inadequate lockdown measures in the face of a rapid spread of the virus that is developing out of control.

The new rules apply to 16 departments, half of which are in the Ile-de-France region that encompasses the capital of Paris, as well as the Hauts-de-France region to the north, where total case numbers and the saturation of hospital units are particularly high. Stores and small businesses selling non-essential goods are to be closed. The population is to remain indoors, but can go outdoors with no time restriction within a radius of 10 kilometres from their homes.

The nationwide curfew that has been in place since December is to continue, with the time shifting from 6 p.m. to 7 p.m. to account for daylight savings.

Most significantly, there will be no restrictions on schools or non-essential workplaces, as during the first lockdown in March, 2020. Castex announced that primary schools and middle schools will continue to operate at normal capacity, while high schools will remain open with classes at half size, as previously in January.

Schools are being kept open so that parents can remain at work, and that profits can continue to pour into the banks and major French corporations. The Macron government, like its counterparts in Europe, is continuing a policy of sacrificing thousands of lives to protect the interests of the financial elite.

Castex was speaking as the number of cases and hospital admissions has reached, and in some regions surpassed, the high point of the wave in November last year. There were more than 35,000 cases of the virus reported on Thursday, and 30,000 the day before. The seven-day average of total cases is above 26,000, the

highest point since November 17, 2020, but is rapidly rising. In a country the size of the United States, this would be approximately 125,000 cases per day. France recorded the third-highest total cases in the world yesterday, after the US and Brazil.

In the Ile-de-France region, the case rate is now 446 per 100,000 people in the population, up by 23 percent in one week.

More than 25,000 people are in hospital with coronavirus, and 4,246 of these are in intensive care units. Approximately 300 people are sent into ICU each day. In certain regions, hospitalization rates are approaching the already stretched maximum capacities of hospitals. In Ile-de-France, for example, the number of new daily hospitalizations was at 60 in the middle of February, reaching 86 by mid-March, and 105 on March 14.

The number of people in ICU in Ile-de-France is over 1,200, more than the peak of last November. Even with the cancellation of elective surgery and other medical appointments, the maximum capacity is reportedly no more than 1,500-1,600. Already last Thursday, Health Minister Olivier Véran had announced that patients from the Paris region would be transferred to hospitals elsewhere in France. In the Hauts-de-France region, patients are being transferred to hospitals in Belgium.

The particularly rapid spread of the virus is no doubt attributable in part to the dominance of the more contagious, and more deadly, variant of the virus first identified in Britain last September. Castex reported that the British variant now makes up more than 75 percent of all cases nationally. At the beginning of January, it was estimated at between 3 and 8 percent of total cases. While in January, the proportion of hospitalisations that required admittance to intensive care was approximately 20 percent, it has since

increased to 27 percent.

The dominance of the new variant also appears to be responsible for a reduction in the average age of those who are being hospitalised. “Over the past 15 days, the average age of patients in intensive care has dropped from 64 to 57 years,” Yves Cohen, the head of the intensive care unit at the Avicenne Hospital in Bobigny, told *Le Monde*. “We have patients who are a lot younger than during the first wave.”

Cohen added that “we are directly hit by the government decisions and we juggle the available beds. As soon as one is freed, it is immediately taken. ... We opened eight new beds 15 days ago, and we can push the walls back further, but we don’t have enough staff anymore.”

An average of 259 people are now dying in France every day from the virus. But this figure, which always lags behind the rise in cases, will rise even further in the coming weeks. The total dead since the beginning of the pandemic stands at 91,679.

In the course of his speech, Castex presented this catastrophic situation as something completely beyond the government’s control, akin to a natural disaster that had nothing to do with the policies pursued by the EU and Macron since the beginning of 2020. He did not attempt to explain the contradiction between the rapid growth of the virus and what he declared were correct policies that the government has implemented.

“The lockdown measures will not be the same as those put in place in March last year,” Castex said. “Since the beginning of the pandemic, a year ago exactly, time has passed, the crisis has continued, but we have learned.” From “January we have opted for a strategy that distinguishes us from other European countries,” he added. “Contrary to many of our neighbours, we did not impose a nationwide lockdown. ... We even refused this option at the end of January. And it was the correct decision.”

In fact, the initial lockdown in March last year, which closed schools and non-essential workplaces, was used to carry out massive corporate bailouts by the EU and protect the wealth of the financial elite. Governments initiated a reopening campaign to insist that the population must return to work and children to school. In every successive lockdown, the government has rejected any measure that would threaten corporate profits.

Macron has depended completely on the close collaboration of the trade unions throughout the pandemic, which have opposed any strike action to demand lockdown measures and supported keeping schools open. In his speech last night, Castex said he would be working closely with the “social partners”—i.e., trade unions—to develop a series of social distancing conditions that could be used to justify keeping workers on the job.



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