

Macron rejects calls for strict lockdown as COVID-19 surges in France

Will Morrow, Alex Lantier
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In a nationally-televised address last night, French President Emmanuel Macron rejected desperate calls from medical authorities for a hard lockdown, as the pandemic spins out of control throughout the country. Instead, Macron announced minor social-distancing measures that are totally inadequate as a contagion driven by COVID-19 variants surges across France and Europe.

Schools will be closed and classes transitioned online for one week, beginning next Monday, before the holiday break at the end of next week. After the two-week holidays, preschool and primary school-aged children will return to in-person classes, while high school classes are to remain online for an additional week. For the 1 or 2 weeks that classes are online, parents who cannot work from home will receive wage assistance to remain at home.

Measures imposed two weeks ago in 20 regions, including Paris, are also to be extended across France. These include closing retail stores selling nonessential items, and limiting people's movements when not going to work or school to a 10-kilometre radius around homes.

Acting with blatant contempt for human life, Macron ignored urgent warnings by medical authorities that anything less than a full lockdown will flood hospitals in Paris and other major cities across France. Thousands of lives will be lost as doctors are forced into the barbaric situation of choosing whom they will treat, and whom they will not treat, for lack of space.

Daily new cases in France range between 34,000 and 45,000—the equivalent of 200,000 daily cases in a country the size of the United States. Less than 5 percent of French people are fully vaccinated against COVID-19.

The day before Macron spoke, Patrick Bouet, the head of the National Council of the Order of Doctors, published an open letter in the daily *Libération* demanding a change in policy. He wrote, “with this terribly grave situation, the strictest measures are imposed upon us, that is, a true lockdown everywhere is needed.” He added, “we have lost control of the epidemic. Patients are ever younger, infections in schools are so many indicators of the continual

degeneration of the situation over the last weeks.”

Bouet cited desperate warnings from the Public Association of Paris Hospitals (AP-HP). With 1,484 patients in intensive care, 90 percent of intensive care beds are already occupied. However, AP-HP warned that a failure to enforce a strict lockdown beginning April 1 would mean more than 3,400 patients in intensive care within the Ile-de-France broader Paris region in three weeks. An additional week's delay, they warned, would mean 1,000 patients more would need intensive care by the end of the month.

“Life can tolerate today no arbitrage, no hesitation, no betting,” Bouet wrote, concluding: “I solemnly ask you to immediately reinforce, clearly and with no detours, our health measures. They can still avoid the virus engulfing everyone across our territory. Mr President, before we are massively vaccinated, everywhere the situation is serious, you must put us under lockdown.”

Instead, Macron signalled that the virus will be allowed to continue spreading throughout the population, in defiance of scientific and medical advice.

A year ago, on March 17, 2020, after a wave of wildcat strikes in Italy, and across Europe and America, French authorities agreed to a two-month full lockdown. At that point, there were less than 8,000 confirmed cases and 175 deaths from COVID-19. Today, there are over 4.2 million active cases and there have been over 95,000 deaths from COVID-19 in France.

Yet Macron proposed not a full but a partial lockdown—without a shutdown of nonessential industrial production, or a full closure of the schools—and for less than half the duration.

As it refuses the measures health authorities are begging it to take, the Macron government is anticipating a vast wave of death that will sweep across France and Europe. It plans to double the number of emergency care beds in France to 10,000 and train new intensive care nurses. At the same time, state officials are discussing plans to distribute oxygen tanks to severely ill patients in their homes—effectively leaving them to their fate, unless they can be treated by a

small number of overworked visiting nurses.

The number of classes forced to close by infections among students and teachers is skyrocketing. Last Friday, the education ministry reported 3,256 classrooms closed, up from 1,238 one week earlier. In Paris, Socialist Party mayor Anne Hidalgo reported that the incidence rate of the virus among 15–18-year-olds is 800 per 100,000, significantly higher than the broader population.

In the working-class Paris area district of Seine-Saint Denis, individual teachers, unsupported by the trade unions, have begun invoking their constitutional right not to work in life-threatening conditions to walk off the job and close schools. These include the closed Eugène Delacroix high school, where at least 20 students' parents have died of COVID-19.

Macron did not attempt to reconcile his decision to briefly close schools with his government's repeated claims that school closures are ineffective against the spread of the virus. Only last Friday, Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer said, "it has not been demonstrated that the holiday period leads to fewer infections than during the school period."

Instead, like the Roman Emperor Nero who fiddled while Rome burned, Macron spent much of his speech congratulating himself on his disastrous handling of COVID-19. "Since the beginning of this year we have opted for a response which aimed at slowing the epidemic without locking down," he said. He hailed his government for "taking into account the consequences of restrictions on our children, on their education, on the economy, on society, on mental health."

In fact, the policy adopted by Macron and the entire European Union (EU) placed profits over lives, with disastrous consequences. In January, polls indicated two-thirds of the French public supported a lockdown to halt the spread of the disease, and doctors were calling on Macron to implement strict social distancing. Yet Macron insisted upon rejecting a lockdown.

Events since then have refuted all Macron's rationalizations for keeping children in school, and workers at work, so that profits would continue to flow to the banks and major corporations. This policy, supported and adopted by governments across the EU, did not "slow" the pandemic. Rather, they led daily new cases in France to pass from around 10,000 at the end of December to triple that or more today.

Claims that "herd immunity" policies would save the economy compared to lockdowns are also exploded as frauds. Countries like China, Taiwan and Vietnam used scientific procedures such as lockdowns and rigorous test-and-trace procedures to limit the spread of the virus. With 96

million inhabitants, Vietnam has seen 35 deaths, and its economy grew over 2 percent in 2020.

France, with just under 67 million inhabitants, has seen nearly 100,000 deaths and, together with the rest of Europe, is sunk in its deepest economic and social crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s. The EU used this pandemic, however, to give a €1.25 trillion bailout to the banks and hand out over €750 billion in EU bailout funds in state loans to major corporations. A parasitic financial aristocracy is feasting on unprecedented handouts of public funds, while thousands are left to die.

The disaster unfolding in France exposes the bankruptcy of European capitalism. This includes not only the banks and the governments, but also the union bureaucracies and their political allies in the middle class, the pseudo-left parties, who in France have served as Macron's essential allies in implementing the open schools policy. Having signed their approval of EU bailouts as part of their negotiations with Macron, the unions isolated strikes by teachers last autumn against in-person learning, allowing Macron to crush strikers with riot police.

Macron's speech is a warning: the only way to avert truly horrific levels of death in France, as across Europe, is the international mobilization of the working class in struggle. Schools and nonessential production must be closed, and workers provided with a comfortable living wage to support them throughout the pandemic until a vaccine can be administered to the entire population. Massive resources must be invested to provide educators with the means for an effective program of online learning for students.

A struggle for such policies can only be organized independently of the union bureaucracies, however, as an international political movement to expropriate the financial aristocracy and transfer state power, including control over health policy, to the working class.



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