

The working class and the struggle against “herd immunity” policies in Europe

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The following report was delivered by Alex Lantier to the 2021 International May Day Online Rally held by the World Socialist Web Site and the International Committee of the Fourth International on May 1. Lantier is the national secretary of the Parti de l'égalité socialiste (Socialist Equality Party) in France.

Dear comrades and friends, I bring fraternal greetings of the *Parti de l'égalité socialiste* of France to this International May Day rally.

The ICFI's call to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees is of historic significance. Events since our last May Day rally have starkly shown that the task of fighting the COVID-19 pandemic requires coordinated international action by the working class.

Last month, the COVID-19 death toll surpassed 1 million in Europe and 100,000 in France, as coronavirus variants drive a new surge of infections. Anger is mounting among workers as hospitals overflow across Europe and medical staff demand scientifically guided, shelter-at-home policies. However, the financial aristocracy is fanatically opposed to any policy to halt the contagion.

Governments in Madrid, Rome, Paris and beyond have pledged to end social distancing over the coming month, even as tens of thousands are still infected each day. Italian scientists calculate that by July, even taking the impact of initial vaccinations into account, between 600 and 1,200 people will die each day in Italy if social distancing is ended. This means several thousand deaths in Europe every day, and hundreds of thousands every month.

Nonetheless, European governments are pressing ahead, with contempt for human life. As reports emerged that British Prime Minister Boris Johnson demanded that his fellow ministers “let the bodies pile

high in their thousands,” French President Emmanuel Macron declared that “no health indicators” could change his decision to fully reopen schools.

French ministers have confirmed that restaurants and cultural venues will finally reopen this month, though at this point, they would reopen only to accelerate a surge of death.

Capitalist governments are pursuing a policy of social murder in the interests of the financial aristocracy. Its wealth surged over the last year, as European institutions distributed trillions of euros in bailouts of banks and major corporations. One million people died, as youth stayed at schools so workers could stay on the job to pump out profits for the banks, and Europe's billionaires collectively increased their holdings by over €1 trillion.

Responsibility for mass deaths does not lie, however, solely with the political criminals who hold high office. “Herd immunity” policies were not implemented by a handful of heads of state alone.

They received the assistance of union bureaucracies and pseudo-left political parties representing affluent layers of the middle class. This is very clear in France, where five union confederations, including the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor, issued a joint statement endorsing European bailouts. A broad layer of pseudo-left parties allied to the unions, such as the New Anti-capitalist Party, criticized lockdowns as a tool of dictatorship.

They worked to tie workers to the political disaster produced by Europe's capitalist governments. Denouncing lockdowns while issuing a few empty and impotent proposals for more spending on education, they campaigned for a return to work and in-person schooling.

When teachers invoked their right to withdraw from

dangerous working conditions last autumn and went on strike, the union federations isolated their struggles, allowing riot police to assault them.

The disaster this has produced is now clear. Since last autumn, over 800,000 people have died of COVID-19 in Europe, including 70,000 in France. In contrast, the very few countries that employed lockdowns and track-and-trace policies controlled the virus: Taiwan saw 11 deaths, Vietnam 35, and China managed to limit the number of COVID-19 deaths to under 5,000.

This shattering experience contains key political lessons. The corporatist framework of “social dialog” in France—in which workers are supposedly “represented” by union bureaucracies in talks with management and the capitalist state—has been exposed as a murderous fraud.

Workers cannot rely on the empty shells of the old national labor bureaucracies of Europe, deserted decades ago by workers and now funded by the state and big business.

Powerful forces are building in the international working class against “herd immunity” policies and the obscene social inequality imposed by the financial aristocracy.

The ICFI’s call to build the IWA-RFC is the great alternative to the empty shells of the old national labor bureaucracies. It opens a path for countless millions of workers around the world who want to mobilize to save lives and oppose the reactionary policies of an entrenched ruling class.

Against a global pandemic, only an organized, global movement of the working class, independent of the union bureaucracies and their political allies, can impose a scientific policy to save the millions of lives that now hang in the balance.

The emergence of such an international workers’ movement, in organizations independent of the national bureaucracies, will pose the question of socialism—that is, the transfer of state power to the working class, the large majority of the population, around the world.

Since Trump’s January 6 coup attempt on the Capitol building in Washington, it is ever clearer that halting the pandemic requires a determined struggle against the threat of military dictatorship. This danger is mounting across Europe. In Germany, cells of neo-Nazi officers are drawing up kill lists and hoarding weapons under the political cover of the federal government and the

military leadership.

For months, Spain’s neo-fascist Vox party has backed coup threats by army officers angered by the wave of strikes across Europe last March that imposed a lockdown in Europe in the spring of 2020.

A week ago, 23 retired French generals issued a statement in a neo-fascist magazine stating that the army could soon be forced to intervene in a civil war and kill thousands on French soil. President Emmanuel Macron, having relied on the security forces to assault “yellow vest” protests, students and striking rail workers, has remained silent on the threat.

This year, 2021, marks the 150th anniversary of the Paris Commune, the first time in history that the working class built its own state and took power, though only in the French capital. One hundred and fifty years ago this month, the French Republic under liberal historian Adolphe Thiers sent its army into Paris. In a Bloody Week of slaughter, from May 21 to 28, it killed 20,000 Parisian workers and crushed the Commune.

As the working class enters into struggle against “herd immunity” policies and the political descendants of Thiers, the critical question is the independent organization of the working class and the construction of the ICFI as its revolutionary vanguard.



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