

Declaring that France must “live with the virus,” Macron ends limited lockdown

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Middle and high schools reopened across France this week, following the reopening of primary schools a week ago. The school reopening dates were set at the beginning of the limited lockdown announced at the end of March, with Macron provocatively declaring that no “health indicators” would change his decision to reopen schools as scheduled.

In the course of the limited lockdown, the rate of reproduction of the virus (R) did not fall below 0.9 until May 3, when it reached 0.88. With an R of 0.9, it takes about a month to reduce daily cases by half. During the two previous lockdowns, the R had fallen much lower and the end to restrictions took place with a far lower number of daily cases. The seven-day average of cases was 20,866 on May 4.

Supporting Macron’s timeline, Health Minister Olivier Véran announced that he intended cases to drop quickly below 20,000 for the second stage of the reopening on May 19. He made this statement even as schools were reopened and the 10 kilometre travel limit was ended.

But the number of people hospitalised, which is independent of the variation in testing and gives a robust indicator of the evolution of cases with a time delay of about 10 days, remains high. On May 4, 1,591 people were newly hospitalised and 28,427 were being treated for coronavirus. For the past six months, 25,000 to 30,000 people have been hospitalised for COVID-19 on a permanent basis.

As in other European countries, Macron has decided to let the virus circulate at a high level under a policy, in all but name, of “herd immunity,” which he now calls “living with the virus.” European leaders are ending lockdowns at every turn, knowing full well that this will accelerate the epidemic. At most, they pretend to hope that vaccination campaigns will limit the

increase in mortality.

The epidemic has been killing an average of 300 people a day since the beginning of the year, but the government considers the situation to be completely acceptable. In France and elsewhere, governments continue to trivialise the daily deaths of hundreds of people. Newspapers and the mainstream media hardly report the daily death toll as previously. The threshold of 100,000 deaths was passed in April without the media seriously examining the reasons for this catastrophe.

There is an attempt to desensitize the population to mass death, which is presented as inevitable, and not the result of well-defined policies that can be opposed and rejected.

The government announced that regions could be reopened if they were below the threshold of 400 cases per 100,000 people, which corresponds to a very active spread of the virus. The hardest-hit regions such as Île-de-France have only just fallen below this threshold.

Epidemiologist Dominique Costagliola, who previously severely criticised the limited lockdown, told *Le Monde*: “All other countries have much lower thresholds, 40 in Japan, 100 in many countries. In France too, we even had a threshold of 50, which was forgotten without any explanation.”

She added, “The likelihood ... of avoiding further hospital saturation is low.” She predicted “lots of deaths, lots of hospitalisations, lots of long-term coronavirus patients, which will weigh on future health costs, general demoralisation of hospital staff, restriction of other care.” This echoes modelling by the Italian epidemiologist Stefano Merler. Merler predicts that, despite the impact of the vaccines, daily mortality will rise to between 600 and 1,300 in July, due to reopening policies.

Two brothers who called for a music concert in Lyon, which brought together 250 young people on March 30, were given a three-month suspended prison sentence for endangering the lives of others. But the press never relates this severe sentence to the behaviour of the Macron government, which sends hundreds of people to an avoidable death every day. The conclusion is that they should expect to enjoy complete judicial impunity.

While the threshold of 60 and 70 percent of immunised adults had previously been cited as the level required for preventing the spread of the virus, the Pasteur Institute has estimated that with the arrival of more contagious variants vaccination coverage will have to be much higher. According to the institute, if the level of contagiousness of the variants is confirmed, and “If the vaccination campaign focuses solely on the adult population ... more than 90% of adults would have to be vaccinated for a complete relaxation of control measures to be possible.”

According to epidemiologists, in order to ensure the safety of the population, the first reopening measures should not take place until a significant proportion of the population has been vaccinated and the circulation of the virus has been reduced sufficiently to allow the tracing and isolation of all cases. Yet European governments are ending lockdowns while vaccination is largely insufficient and the number of cases is high everywhere. About 10 percent of the French population is fully vaccinated, with 24 percent having received at least one dose.

In addition to the illnesses and deaths this policy brings, it encourages the mutation and development of new variants that can bypass the immunity acquired naturally by the disease or by vaccines. For example, Brazilian and South African variants with this characteristic more than doubled in the second half of April in the Île-de-France region. This is a repeat of the policy from last year, at the end of the second wave of the virus, when the reopening allowed the English variant to establish itself massively within the space of weeks.

The irrationality of the health policy pursued by European governments is clear. The enormous economic and social sacrifices of the working class during the lockdowns is being systematically squandered by the policy of “living with the virus.”

The Macron government came to power with a

programme to destroy decades of social gains of the working class and favour the most base exploitation of labour by capital. This policy, which benefits a tiny minority of the population, has produced a social catastrophe. The subordination of social life to private profit is incompatible with the rational management of a complex society that benefits the majority of the population.

But an alternative must also be proposed and fought for. This alternative is a socialist policy against the coronavirus, determined by science and coordinated internationally by the working class.

For this, new means of mass working-class struggle must be developed. The International Committee of the Fourth International has called for the creation of an International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. For the working class to fight back, a way must be found to coordinate its struggles in factories, industries and countries against the ruling class. New forms of organization will allow action independently of the pro-capitalist trade unions, which are openly aligned with the ruling-class policy of herd immunity, and the pseudo-left political organizations that promote them in order to suppress working-class struggles. The perspective that must guide and unify these struggles is of world socialist revolution.



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