

Indifferent to the spread of the virus, Macron proceeds with reopening in France

Jacques Valentin
17 May 2021

The French government is moving forward with its plans to almost completely end coronavirus restrictions by June 30. It is acting in response to pressure from financial and business circles to fully resume economic activity to guarantee the continued accumulation of profits amidst a continuing spread of the deadly virus.

This reopening is also part of a fierce competition between European countries over creating the most business-friendly environment in the shortest time, ensuring they can profit from the summer tourist season.

Across Europe, the same policy is underway. At the end of April, bars and restaurants began reopening for outdoor service in Italy, along with cinemas, concert halls and theatres. Tourists from across Europe can now also travel to the country as of the middle of this month. The six-month state of emergency in Spain ended on May 9. In the UK, Prime Minister Boris Johnson is proceeding with plans announced in April to end lockdown measures completely by June 21.

In France, as was the case for Macron's reopening of primary and secondary schools after a short break on April 6 and May 3, the next steps in the reopening of May 19, June 9 and June 30 are fixed and will proceed regardless of the development of the pandemic.

On May 19, the nightly curfew will be moved from 7:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m., nonessential shops will reopen, and cafés and restaurants will resume outdoor dining. Museums, cinemas, theatres and public monuments will also reopen. Physical activities, both indoor and outdoor, will be allowed again, except for contact sports.

On June 9, the curfew will be pushed back to 11:00 p.m. Restaurants will reopen completely. Contact sports will resume outdoors. Large events (such as trade fairs) will be allowed again, and the recourse to online

working from home will be restricted.

After June 30, only nightclubs will remain closed, and only the compulsory wearing of masks and some other social distancing protocols will remain.

The Minister of Education Jean-Michel Blanquer has been a particularly aggressive opponent of lockdown measures in Macron's government and boasts of the fact that the French school system has been one of the least subject to school closures in Europe and America.

In the face of a surge in the virus and anger among parents, teachers and students, the government was compelled to change its policy and allow for classes to close as soon as a single coronavirus case was detected, as opposed to three previously. It has also finally released more detailed statistics, indicating that 5,000 classes were closed on May 7, as well as 32 entire schools. On that date, 9,536 pupils were infected over seven days, in addition to 768 staff members. Apparently using the public holiday on May 13 as a pretext, the ministry has not published any data this week.

This information is however crucial, as schools were the first to reopen and could provide essential data to assess the circulation of the virus.

The government's national coronavirus report published on May 15 shows 15,685 additional cases. The seven-day average is listed at over 13,600, but this data is probably underestimated due to the drop in testing during the long weekend last week. The effective reproduction rate of the virus has been reduced more significantly over the past week and is now between 0.7 and 0.8. This is sufficiently low enough to enforce a rapid decline of the virus. But the incidence rate remains at 166 cases per 100,000, which means that the virus is still circulating very actively.

While more than 107,000 people have died, the daily

average of deaths over seven days only dropped below 200 a few days ago. The rate of hospital admissions is decreasing as well as the number of people admitted to intensive care, but both remain at high levels. The occupancy rate of intensive care beds remains above 100 percent in Île-de-France, the region surrounding the capital of Paris, and in the North. No region has a rate below 50 percent.

Public Health France stated that “hospital pressure remains high, particularly in urgent care services in most regions, necessitating the utmost vigilance in the coming weeks given the gradual relaxation of collective measures.”

The rate of vaccination is now accelerating, but only 13 percent of the population has been vaccinated as of May 11. Macron has just welcomed the passage of the first 20 million doses injected this weekend. Yet only 30 percent of French people have received a first dose, which is wholly insufficient to block the circulation of the virus.

According to the Pasteur Institute, because the more contagious variants of the virus make up almost all cases, “more than 90 percent of adults would need to be vaccinated for a complete ending of restrictions to be possible.” This comment reads as an implicit indictment of the irresponsible health policy pursued by Macron and the European Union.

Given the timetable for the lockdown, there will undoubtedly be a rise in cases during the month of June as the reopening expands.

The government’s refusal to pursue a “zero coronavirus” policy and its policy of alternating extremely limited lockdowns with the explicit demand by Macron for the population to “live with the virus” have kept the hospital system under enormous pressure since the late summer of 2020. This is leading to a general exhaustion of the nation’s health care staff. The treatment of other conditions has been degraded, and the general health of the population is deteriorating.

In spite of this, the government is pursuing its policy of austerity and restructuring of the hospital sector, with new cuts to the number of beds planned, notably in Paris, Nantes, Rennes, Tours and Nancy.

The situation in the hospitals is dramatic, with emergency rooms being understaffed and overflowing for years, which was highlighted when hospital staff went on strike in 2019. In intensive care, studies show

that half of doctors and a third of nurses are suffering from severe exhaustion. This can be explained by long working hours and night shifts.

Conditions are also very poor in the rest of the hospital system, as well as in the overall health care and social system, such as institutions for the elderly.

The policy being pursued across France and the European Union poses enormous dangers for the working class. The ruling class is recklessly pursuing a policy that will permit the virus to spread, under conditions where even more contagious variants, such as the one now ravaging India, are already present in Europe. Moreover, it is creating the conditions for even more contagious and possibly vaccine-resistant strains of the virus to evolve, potentially also jeopardising the immunity currently obtained within the vaccinated population.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact