

France ends Covid-19 restrictions on businesses as Delta variant spreads

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On June 30, President Emmanuel Macron ended social distancing measures that restricted business operations in France. Rules that limited the spread of coronavirus are being scrapped even as the more contagious Delta variant, first found in India, becomes dominant across Europe.

Workplace cafeterias, shops, museums, cinemas, theaters, restaurants and other closed public spaces will operate at pre-pandemic capacity. Restaurants will no longer limit the number of people at a table to six. The official protocol suggests that workplaces “set up, as much as possible, carry-out lunches that can be eaten at workstations” to limit crowding in canteens, but this is up to employers’ discretion and, therefore, largely meaningless.

Among the few venues still facing restrictions are music and sports events, which are limited to 2,500 people, though attendees at events with over 1,000 people will have to prove they are vaccinated or recently tested negative for Covid-19. The reopening of night clubs has been delayed to July 9, while the government negotiates with business owners who rejected its reopening plan as overly restrictive.

The policy of Macron, backed by the entire European Union (EU) and tacitly accepted by virtually the entire political establishment, is to allow the Delta variant to spread unchecked. Workers are supposed to accept the inevitability of infection and hope vaccines will protect them.

As for the unvaccinated, including children and many workers, they are to be left to their fate. Macron has declined to push for universal adult vaccination or organize a media campaign calling for vaccination. This means a policy of “herd immunity,” letting the virus spread unhindered, will provoke new mass infections and, potentially, the emergence of new, deadlier variants.

Moreover, it is widely reported that Macron plans to end free Covid-19 testing. Non-residents are to pay for

Covid-19 tests starting on July 7, and French citizens and residents in September.

Amid mounting concern over the Delta variant and its impact on vaccine effectiveness, Macron kept restrictions on businesses until July 6 in the Landes, the southwestern area of France most affected by the Delta variant. This only underscores that he has no serious intention of stopping the Delta variant’s spread. There is no reason to believe the variant will disappear by July 6. Moreover, its presence is already confirmed in the Riviera, the Alps and the Paris area, where no measures are being taken.

Macron is again defying warnings from scientific authorities, who expect the Delta variant will trigger mass outbreaks of Covid-19 in Europe by September. Over the last month, its spread has seen the number of cases rise from 3,000 to 26,000 in Britain, double to 21,000 in Russia, and quadruple to 1,700 in Portugal. Portuguese authorities imposed a brief lockdown on the capital, Lisbon, trying to halt its spread. However, it is now present across Europe.

Super-spreader events are now taking place, particularly during the Euro football cup. UK officials reported that 1,290 infected Scottish fans traveled to Wembley Stadium in London on June 18, while Finland is seeing hundreds of infections among fans returning from the cup. Over 1,000 people nationwide in Spain have tested positive following a super-spreader event at end-of-year student holidays in Majorca.

French Health Minister has Olivier Véran confirmed that 20 percent of Covid-19 infections in France are now caused by the Delta variant. On Wednesday, the Robert Koch Institute reported that the Delta variant accounts “for at least half of all new infections” in Germany.

Yesterday, Pasteur Institute epidemiologist Arnaud Fontanet told BFM-TV that infections will rise significantly “by September-October,” due to the variants: “The Delta variant, in two months, will most

likely replace the viruses that are currently present on French territory, with the possible exception of the South African Beta variant. It will become predominant, in any case ... on the order of 80 to 90 percent of infections.”

Jean-François Delfraissy, the president of France’s National Scientific Council, told *France Inter* that current, “extremely low” daily infection levels in France, between 1,500 and 3,000, are “from a certain standpoint, falsely reassuring.” He said: “We must remember what happened the summer of last year. We were at essentially comparable figures as the end of June 2020, and we saw the second wave arrive in September.”

Delfraissy said vaccines are effective against the Delta variant “for someone who has received two doses,” but not just one dose. “So the message is: get vaccinated, and have your two injections before school starts.” He said anyone over age 60 should probably get a third, booster dose.

It is critical to politically alert and mobilize the working class against Macron’s policy, which leads to disaster. Already, 1.1 million Europeans have died of Covid-19 due to the EU’s opposition to scientific social-distancing measures. Yet a new wave of infections is being prepared. As when Macron told France to “live with the virus”—or, more bluntly, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson demanded “no more f--ing lockdowns, let the bodies pile high in their thousands!”—European governments plan to save the billions of the super-rich, even if millions die.

This week, the EU Commission approved France’s €39.4 billion part of the first slice of the €750 billion “Next Generation EU” pandemic bailout. While European billionaires saw their collective net worth rise by €1 trillion during the pandemic—thanks to a €1.25 trillion European Central Bank bailout—the EU bailout for its part funds private companies’ plans for a “digital and ecological transition.” To repay this bailout, Macron is discussing a pension cut and raising the retirement age two years to 64 with business and trade union federations.

At the same time, European governments’ policy is set to provoke millions of new Covid-19 infections. Even if the figures cited in the French media are correct, and two vaccines doses offer 90-95 percent protection against falling ill even with the Delta variant, this would not avert mass illness.

Firstly, even in the wealthiest countries, large unvaccinated populations remain vulnerable. Britain is seeing a resurgence of Covid-19, though 67 percent of its population has had one vaccine dose and 49 percent are fully vaccinated.

Vaccination rates are even lower on the European continent. In France, 30 percent of the population is fully vaccinated and 50 percent have had one dose. In June, moreover, daily vaccinations in France fell from 350,000 to less than 180,000. This means, *Le Point* notes, that “the government’s objective, 35 million people fully vaccinated and 45 million with at least one dose by August, is harder to reach than it appears.” Even this target, however, would only see 52 percent of Frenchmen fully vaccinated and 67 percent with one dose.

Secondly, even if the entire vaccinated population is protected with 95 percent effectiveness, many will still fall ill if repeatedly exposed to infected, non-vaccinated individuals. The US Centers for Disease Control have reported that 4,100 Americans have been hospitalized or died of Covid-19 though fully vaccinated. Such figures will rise if infections spike due to “herd immunity” policies.

Medical and technical means exist to contain and ultimately eradicate the virus, but mobilizing them requires a political struggle. Workers and youth need their own, rank-and-file safety committees, independent of unions who are negotiating bailouts and “herd immunity” policies with the EU, to monitor and stop the spread of the virus in workplaces and schools. Taking control of the resources needed to end the pandemic requires unifying workers internationally in a struggle to bring down the EU and build the United Socialist States of Europe.



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