

Former French health minister charged for “endangering the lives of others” over COVID-19 policies

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On September 10, the French Court of Justice questioned former Health Minister Agnès Buzyn and charged her for “endangering the lives of others.” Buzyn was health minister in the Macron government from 2017 to 2020, including during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Her indictment underscores the widely felt understanding in the populations of France and internationally that the ruling class pursued a policy of social murder in response to the pandemic.

While France’s political establishment either supports Macron’s policies or has backed the reactionary anti-vaccine campaign launched by the far right and supported by the trade unions, another response to the bankruptcy of the capitalist class is developing from elsewhere. The public prosecutor has so far received 14,500 complaints about the lack of protective equipment for health care workers and the public, a reflection of the enormous social opposition in the working class. To date, nine complaints have been deemed admissible by the court.

The charging of Buzyn follows the opening of a judicial investigation by the General Prosecutor’s Office of the appeals court on July 3, 2020. The plaintiffs, including representatives of a group of doctors, were interviewed at the beginning of September and documented their claims of “endangering the life of others,” “involuntary manslaughter” and “non-assistance to a person in danger.”

The investigation led to several searches in October 2020 at the homes and offices of Buzyn, but also of the Minister of Health, Olivier Véran; of the former Prime Minister Edouard Philippe; of Sibeth Ndiaye, former spokesperson for the government; of the Director General of Health, Jérôme Salomon; and of the General Director of Public Health France, Geneviève Chêne. Buzyn is the first public figure to be charged in this case.

Buzyn has also been placed under the status of witness for “refusal to take appropriate measures to combat a disaster.” This offence, punishable by two years in prison and a fine of 30,000 euros, concerns “anyone who voluntarily refrains from taking or initiating measures that would allow, without risk to himself or to third parties, combating a disaster likely to endanger people’s safety.”

The current Minister of Health, Olivier Véran, the former Prime Minister Edouard Philippe and current Prime Minister Jean Castex will also be questioned.

Not surprisingly, these ministers have the support of the major media outlets and hope to turn the trials to their advantage and legitimize their ongoing policy of permitting the virus to spread.

On the morning of her hearing, Agnès Buzyn declared: “Today is an excellent opportunity for me to explain myself and to restore the truth of the case. I will not let the government’s action, my action as a minister, be tarnished when we have done so much to prepare our country for a global health crisis which, I remind you, is still ongoing.”

The decision to indict Buzyn and the hearing of high officials by the court is the product, above all, of the fear of popular opinion in official circles. Large sections of the working class are convinced that the Macron government has perpetrated a social crime by allowing the coronavirus to kill around 115,000 people in France.

Buzyn’s statement before her hearing contradicts her admission at the beginning of 2020 to the newspaper *Le Monde* that for months, all the top leaders of the Macron government had knowingly minimized the danger posed by the virus. She explained then that “on December 20, an English-language blog detailed a strange infectious lung disease. I alerted the General Director of Health. On January 11, I sent a message to the president about the

situation. On January 30, I warned [Prime Minister] Edouard Philippe that the elections should probably not be held. I was wrestling against my restraints.”

According to Buzyn, she warned at that time that there “would be thousands of deaths.”

For months, presenting the coronavirus as a simple flu, the French authorities did nothing to prepare for an epidemic. They did not even buy masks when government stocks were empty. Not only were the municipal elections held as Europe became the world center of the pandemic, but Buzyn lied publicly, stating on January 24 that “the risk of propagation of the coronavirus in the population is very low.”

The reactions of the political class, including the opposition parties, to the indictment of the former health minister, show the complicity of the entire political establishment with the strategy of the Macron government and the EU of “herd immunity.” No political or trade union organization warned of the deadly danger workers would be exposed to, because they were all agreed to keep workers on the job.

The prime minister’s office defended Buzyn, stating, “No one can doubt the seriousness and commitment that [Agnès Buzyn] showed at the first signs of the epidemic. France took the necessary measures very quickly.”

Damien Abad, president of the Republicans group in the National Assembly, and deputy for the region of Ain, told BFMTV that he “does not share the desire to charge everyone; that’s not how we do politics.” Laurent Berger, secretary general of the CFDT trade union, said he was “uncomfortable” with the fact that politicians who had done their job as best they could were being “thrown into the public eye.”

The decisive question in this case is to politically mobilize the working class, who cannot expect the capitalist courts to rule on the responsibility of the Macron government and the international financial aristocracy. Nor can any faith be placed in the trade union apparatuses to lead a struggle.

It is the workers themselves who through wildcat strikes forced European governments, including Macron’s, into the initial lockdowns in March 2020. The ruling class, however, refused to organize systematic contact tracing and limitation of the virus after the ending of the first lockdown, while refusing to re-implement a lockdown of non-essential industries and schools. The entire ruling class is responsible for a social murder that has killed 115,000 people in France and 1.2 million in Europe.

This is in contrast to China, which pursued a serious

scientific policy against the pandemic from the beginning, and thus limited the number of deaths to 5,000. However, in order to carry out this policy on an international scale and put an end to the pandemic, the international working class must be mobilized, independently of the trade union apparatuses, which are allies of governments and the capitalist elite’s policy of “herd immunity.”

Such a struggle will be fiercely opposed by the financial aristocracy and its military and political leaders. In April, thousands of retired and current French officers signed tribunes proposing to conduct military operations to repress social opposition in France and kill thousands of people. Far-right politicians speak openly of their terror at the danger of revolution and of their plans to establish a military dictatorship.

“Today, to the security crisis is added the pandemic, all against the backdrop of an economic, social and political crisis, while there is no confidence in government leaders,” said retired General Philippe de Villiers. “I fear that this pent-up anger will explode, all at the same time. ... The rule of law is obviously important, but at some point, it is also necessary to think strategically.”

Against this small reactionary ruling elite, isolated and terrorized by the population, it is necessary to mobilize the workers in a struggle to defend democratic rights and impose a strategy of eradication of the virus. To this end, the Socialist Equality Party advocates the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-file Committees. The defense of democratic rights and lives will require the development of a political movement for socialism and the transfer of political power to the workers.



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