

Macron calls for policies of austerity, mass infection in France

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Tuesday night, with the COVID-19 pandemic surging across Europe, French President Emmanuel Macron gave a prime-time address. It epitomized the murderous arrogance of the “president of the rich.” As over 3,000 people die of COVID-19 daily in Europe, and the World Health Organization (WHO) warns of 500,000 COVID-19 deaths before February, he proposed new attacks on pensions and unemployment insurance while demanding the French people “live with the virus.”

While Macron is so concerned with his own unpopularity that he has not yet formally declared his candidacy for re-election in April, the speech effectively marked the launch of his re-election bid. Currently dominated by Macron and neo-fascist candidates Eric Zemmour and Marine Le Pen, the campaign is politically toxic. Macron’s speech aimed primarily to assure the banks that he is the best candidate to guarantee their profits at the expense of workers’ lives and living standards, by ensuring no effective action is taken to halt the pandemic.

As over 10,000 people are confirmed infected and dozens die of COVID-19 every day in France, Macron began with a thoroughly false presentation of his record on the pandemic:

Our decisions were always based on scientific knowledge, the necessity of protecting ourselves, our will to act proportionately, and on the conviction that our greatest strength is individual and collective responsibility. This is what led us to decide twice on lockdowns when they were needed, in spring and autumn 2020. Then, we limited ourselves to a curfew and appropriate rules for each region at the beginning of this year, 2021, at a time when many of our neighbours were closing everything.

Macron rejected any further lockdowns or distance learning for schools, instead proposing a third dose of vaccines for over-65s, and for over-50s starting in December, to limit the death toll while the virus runs rampant. He concluded, “we know we will have to live with the virus and its variants until the world population as a whole is immunized.”

This position needlessly condemns hundreds of thousands of people across Europe and millions worldwide to die of the virus. Macron is imitating British Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s infamous call: “No more fucking lockdowns, let the bodies pile high in their thousands.” As the virus circulates broadly, and hundreds of millions are unvaccinated or have fading immunity from a less-recent vaccination, this policy will lead to the emergence of more new variants and mass infections and death.

This is why Europe is on track to see 100,000 COVID-19 deaths this month, though a large part of its population is vaccinated. Germany, which has a similar proportion of its population vaccinated as France, is seeing over 45,000 cases and 150 to 250 deaths each day.

Macron’s claims that he bases his policy on science are false. From the beginning of the pandemic his government lied about the virus and trampled scientific advice underfoot. Former Health Minister Agnès Buzyn, who is now being prosecuted for her handling of the pandemic, publicly dismissed COVID-19 as a “little flu,” while privately warning Macron’s cabinet that the virus was causing mass deaths in China. The French government also initially destroyed large quantities of masks, falsely claiming they were useless to fight the virus.

Macron did not decide on the spring 2020 lockdown: it was imposed by a wave of strikes spreading from Italy across much of Europe. Companies “cannot continue operations due to pressure from workers,” French Business Movement (Medef) vice president Patrick

Martin said at the time, bemoaning “an extremely brutal change in attitude by the workers.” This strict lockdown brought the number of daily cases in France down to below 500 and halted a massive wave of death at around 27,000 in France and 200,000 in Europe.

If the number of COVID-19 deaths now stands at over 1.3 million in Europe and 118,000 in France, this is because the Macron administration and other EU governments refused to implement contact tracing to halt the regrowth of cases and has ruled out ever again imposing a strict lockdown. Since then, they have focused exclusively on keeping schools and workplaces open, to ensure a continued flow of profits to the super-rich. Whatever “lockdowns” were implemented were not strict, but involved keeping non-essential workplaces open and children in school so their parents could be kept at work.

The contrast with China—where a zero-Covid policy has limited deaths to under 5,000 and caused far less damage to the livelihoods of workers and small businesses—is a staggering indictment of the Macron administration, who set priorities of profits over lives.

While millions died in Europe, the European Central Bank printed €1.25 trillion in bank bailouts and the European Union (EU) launched a €750 billion corporate and state bailout scheme, of which Macron announced that France is to receive €100 billion.

The Macron government and the European ruling class as a whole intend for these massive sums of public money to continue being funnelled directly to the pockets of the financial aristocracy. Macron proposes a few sops to workers, such as responding to surging inflation with a temporary cap on natural gas prices and distributing €100 checks to workers earning less than €2,000 monthly. The real money, however, goes to the billionaires, who in Europe have added a staggering \$1 trillion to their net worth during the pandemic.

The 500 wealthiest families in France now hold just under €1 trillion, up 30 percent in just one year, according to *Challenges* magazine. LVMH luxury conglomerate owner Bernard Arnault owns €157 billion, up 57 percent from 2020; the Hermès family, €81.5 billion, up 47 percent; L’Oréal heiress Françoise Bettencourt-Meyers, €71.4 billion, up 40 percent; the Wertheimer clan of Chanel, €67 billion, up 26 percent; François Pinault of the Kering luxury conglomerate, €41.5 billion, up 30 percent. At the same time, France’s economy contracted 8 percent due to the pandemic.

The rest of Macron’s speech was dedicated to promoting austerity measures that will further boost the

wealth of his wealthy backers. He pledged to slash unemployment insurance “in the coming weeks,” by purging the rolls of large numbers of unemployed: “Job seekers who are not actively seeking work will see their payments suspended.”

Macron also said he planned to raise the official retirement age from 62 to 65 and take other steps to effectively cut pensions. Significantly, he said he would not take action immediately for fear of provoking a social explosion: “The health situation we face and that is worsening across Europe, the common wish of business and trade union federations to focus on restoring the economy, and our nation’s need for social harmony means that conditions are not right to return to this topic today.”

He also agreed not to promulgate the pension cut he passed last year in the face of mass strikes, and which has already been voted into law. It is, however, only a matter of time before Macron or his successor move to slash public pensions in France.

Macron’s speech exemplified an essential point: that the principal obstacles to ending the pandemic, and to providing decent salaries and living standards, are not technological, but political, due to the obscene and criminal self-enrichment of the ruling class. As the French ruling elite puts forward either neo-fascists or Macron and his fascistic record as the principal presidential candidates, it is ever more apparent that the elections by themselves will resolve nothing.

The critical question is building a socialist movement in the European and international working class for the expropriation of the ill-gotten wealth of the ruling elites, and use of this wealth to end the pandemic and ensure social equality and prosperity for all.



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