French health care workers denounce government's deadly pandemic policy

Our reporters
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On December 4, health care workers marched across France to protest appalling conditions in hospitals and President Emmanuel Macron's murderous COVID-19 policy.

It was part of a growing international wave of strikes and protests, notably of health workers, across Europe. On November 25, 1,000 workers at pharmaceutical company Sanofi joined a one-day warning strike, while hundreds of Danish nurses organized a wildcat stoppage and a mass resignation to protest pay and working conditions on November 29. There have been waves of strikes by social care workers and transport workers across several regions of France, as well as the recent mass metalworkers' strikes in Spain.

WSWS reporters spoke to several health workers at a protest in Paris. Constance, an emergency room nurse in the Paris region, said: "We are protesting because the hospital is in bad shape. There are always more and more bed closures. Before the pandemic we didn't have enough beds, and there was no room in rehabilitation clinics and care homes."

The pandemic, she added, has led to disaster: "Now it is difficult to find beds for patients. We don't know what to do with them. We have to leave them on stretchers. It's shameful. But beds continue to be closed and open staff positions are not filled. They blame nurses for leaving, but actually, we don't want to stay because it isn't worth it. We only stay because of our passion for helping people, other than that there is nothing else making us stay. The government is not doing anything for us, or for the hospital. It does nothing for caregivers, but it also does nothing for the sick."

Florence, also a Paris area nurse, told the WSWS, "in the department in which I work, which is a large Parisian hospital, we still have closed beds due to a lack of medical and paramedical staff. It endangers staff because we work under very tiring conditions and endangers patients who can no longer be accommodated due to the shortages."

She criticized the Macron government's denials that it is closing hospital beds, claiming instead that it is opening space for outpatient treatment: "A few years ago, they introduced text follow-ups with outpatients when they leave the hospital. It also creates further safety issues with patients … It is so difficult to medically judge yourself, and it isn't patients' job to do that."

Constance added, "Our population is aging. Someone with a broken femur at age 97 cannot get outpatient treatment. It's an outrage to be prioritizing outpatient over inpatient treatment. … They want to make so much money that they think about nothing but money, money, money, and we lose beds. It's not real beds, outpatient work, it's a machine to make profits."

Both nurses sharply criticized the French government's handling of the pandemic, firstly when it failed to provide masks, hand sanitizer or clear health instructions during the initial outbreak in March 2020. "The problem," Constance said, "is that from the start they contradicted themselves every week. So that created broad mistrust in the government."

Florence added, "They never stopped telling us that there was no danger of infection in mass transit, trains, but now we know this is false. They also said kids didn't get sick [from COVID-19] or don't transmit it. That's totally false, there is no reason children wouldn't catch it, too."

Constance pointed especially to the government's failure to properly trace contacts and eliminate spread of the virus after the initial lockdown in the spring of 2020. She said, "COVID-19 contact tracing was not at

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all well done. There is a professor at the Pitié-Salpêtrière hospital … who did contact tracing in Haiti for cholera. And they managed to eradicate the infection thanks to contact tracing that was done almost in a military way, or anyway very effectively by a single centralized body. And that was not done in France" for COVID-19.

She added, "That means that we keep going up and down with COVID-19 numbers."

She stressed that a more aggressive, scientific policy could stop the pandemic: "It would have been better if we had had quarantine periods from the start, if it had been respected, if we had set up fever hotels as was done in certain other countries. If we had closed the borders, except in exceptional cases, that would have been really very interesting. I think that tourism, at the time, was not the right priority."

The health workers all dread the impact of the current surge and the spread of the more vaccine-resistant Omicron variant. Last week saw four consecutive days of 50,000 cases in France. In the last seven days, 635 deaths have been recorded in France, a 49 percent increase from the previous week. The detection of at least a dozen cases of the Omicron variant in France threatens to intensify the current surge, leading to further strain on hospitals and more deaths.

Christophe Trivalle, a geriatric doctor at Paul-Brousse hospital, warned that hospitals are being overrun: "COVID-19 is not over. We have come back to the previous state where we have a considerable staff shortage, and we have a lot of closed services, closed beds and a lack of nurses. If you go to an emergency department, there are many patients on stretchers because there are no beds to take care of them."

He added, "During the first wave, many health staff were very mobilized. … The young ones were very mobilized, they were applauded. The president said that we would provide resources for health and everyone was very, very eager to help. However, we are now in a situation where we are no longer given these resources. We had a lot of reinforcements during the first wave. We do not have them anymore, we are understaffed everywhere and people are demoralized. … We are arriving on a fifth wave that will probably be big, and we run the risk of being overwhelmed."

In March 2020, wildcat strikes in Italy, France, and the US forced the implementation of the first social distancing measures. Today, only a mass movement of the working class consciously fighting to end transmission of the virus can lead to the implementation of a scientific health policy and stop the pandemic. The nurses pointed to the enormous gulf separating working people from the banks and the ruling elites who have profited from policies of mass infection, keeping workers on the job.

During the pandemic, Constance said, "The financial interest of large companies emerged as the winner. And we have to struggle, struggle every day. In the first wave I was in the emergency room. I saw people whose conditions have suddenly got so much worse as we were intubating them very quickly, there wasn't even time to comprehend what was going on. Meanwhile, big companies were making money. I don't understand the world we live in."

When a WSWS reporter pointed to the investigation of former Health Minister Agnès Buzyn over her handling of the pandemic and asked if state criminality was involved, Constance replied: "Well, yes, obviously."

She said, "From the beginning they have been totally incoherent, blaming the wrong people, health care staff for leaving, people for not respecting health rules, going to movie theatres or cafés. But in fact it is their responsibility to lead and they did not do it. It is a scandal."

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