

French presidential candidates silent on COVID-19's human cost

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The COVID-19 pandemic has killed millions and profoundly destabilized global capitalism, accelerating the economic, social, and political crisis in France. It is once again on the rise again in France with more than 200,000 new cases and hundreds of deaths every day. Nevertheless, the candidates in the upcoming presidential election are strikingly silent on the human toll of COVID-19.

France has seen over 26 million infections, or nearly 40 percent of the population, and 142,000 deaths. Across Europe there have been 179 million infections and 1.8 million deaths. Among workers, the pandemic has impacted every family. Everyone has a relative, child or friend who has been more or less seriously infected with COVID-19. In the last seven days alone, France has recorded 1 million cases and 815 deaths from the virus.

The resumption of the epidemic can be explained in part by the arrival of the BA.2 variant, aided by the lifting of health restrictions since February 16. The BA.2 is more virulent than the Omicron variant, which infected around 14 million people in France between December and February.

In the presidential campaign, the suffering of millions mourning the loss of loved ones, living with the short- and long-term effects of the virus, or fighting for their lives against the illness counts for absolutely nothing. Everything is subordinated to the maintenance of economic activity, or to be more precise, to the need to maintain the flow of trillions of euros directly into the pockets of the banks and the financial aristocracy.

At a press conference presenting his re-election platform, Emmanuel Macron did not say a word about the pandemic, only mentioning “a crisis of meaning among many health professionals” when discussing his plans for health care. It was as if the pandemic had

never happened. The word “COVID” does not even appear in Macron’s presidential program.

The other candidates, regardless of their political coloration, are silent on the enormous human cost of Macron’s criminal management of the pandemic and do not warn of the deadly danger posed by the resumption of the pandemic and Macron’s lifting of all health restrictions. This is in stark contrast to the warnings from scientists and doctors that the pandemic is not over.

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus warned on Wednesday, March 9, that “the pandemic is far from over, and it will not be over anywhere until it’s over everywhere. The virus continues to evolve, and we continue to face major obstacles in distributing vaccines, tests, and treatments everywhere they are needed. ... [S]everal countries are drastically reducing testing. This inhibits our ability to see where the virus is, how it’s spreading and how it’s evolving.”

The silence of other candidates allowed Marine Le Pen of the neo-fascist National Rally (RN) party to make hollow criticisms of the government’s handling of the coronavirus pandemic.

Asked about the policy she would have applied since March 2020, the former RN leader said she would have done “radically differently on the entire health crisis.” Le Pen claimed she would not have “lied about the masks” or “about the tests,” referring to “statements by Emmanuel Macron and the government on the subject, which have changed over time.”

This is hollow posturing. Le Pen’s goal is not to eliminate the transmission of the virus and stop the pandemic. Her party and other neo-fascist parties have been the driving force behind protests demanding the end to all health restrictions. A real international

eradication strategy, like the one China is pursuing, though on a national level, can only be achieved through the conscious, international mobilization of the working class against the ruling elites who are pursuing a policy of mass infection.

The absence of COVID-19 from the candidates' speeches underlines their support for the "living with the virus" policy of Macron and the financial aristocracy. It also exposes pseudo-left parties like Jean-Luc Mélenchon's La France Insoumise (LFI, Unsubmissive France), who have supported the strategy of mitigation and, ultimately, of herd immunity pursued by Macron and the EU.

Mélenchon's program only mentions the coronavirus a handful of times, to mechanically call for increased spending on health care and hospitals. But like all the other candidates, Mélenchon is silent about the human cost of the pandemic and its management by the Europe's capitalist governments. Indeed, this is a social crime that has cost millions of lives and in which the petty-bourgeois pseudo-left parties are implicated in the same way as Macron and the far right.

The pseudo-left LFI, the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA), and Workers' Struggle (LO) backed the demonstrations against vaccination and the health pass in the summer of 2021. This winter, they endorsed the "freedom convoys," inspired by far-right demonstrations in Canada linked to the neo-Nazi forces that staged the January 6, 2021 coup attempt to keep Trump in the presidency despite his election loss to Biden.

These organizations, while acknowledging the presence of the far right in these mobilizations, falsely claimed that they defended the interests of workers against austerity.

Mélenchon's role is unmasked by the politics of his sister party, Podemos, in Spain, which is in power with the social democrats of the PSOE. The PSOE and Podemos declared in mid-January that the pandemic would be treated in the future like the flu. Testing and contact tracing have been drastically reduced, and the counting of new infections will be suspended in large parts of Spain.

With blatant disregard for the deaths and various illnesses that COVID-19 infections will cause, Podemos is promoting mass infection. Infected people who develop mild symptoms will go to work or school

to infect others. Testing or isolation at home will no longer be mandatory. Only high-risk individuals will continue to be subject to the previous health measures. The only obligation that remains for the time being is the wearing of masks in indoor public places, as well as in transport.

The struggle to commemorate the real human suffering associated with the pandemic, and to stop it scientifically, cannot be fought through an electoral vote. Presidential elections, between candidates selected and vetted by the banks and the state apparatus, will solve nothing in the fight to end the pandemic. Only an international, socialist and revolutionary movement of the working class can overthrow the financial aristocracy and impose a scientific and humane policy to end the nightmare of the coronavirus pandemic.



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