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Macron's pandemic speech and the politics of “social murder”

In February, analysing the British government's refusal to impose a lockdown to halt the spread of COVID-19, the BMJ (formerly *British Medical Journal*) wrote that the government's response to the pandemic “might be classified as social murder.” It pointedly asked: “When politicians wilfully neglect scientific advice, international and historical experience, and their own alarming statistics and modelling because to act goes against their political strategy, is that lawful?”

This policy was on full display on Wednesday evening, as 31 million people tuned in for French President Emmanuel Macron's primetime speech on the upsurge of COVID-19 now devastating France and Europe.



French President Emmanuel Macron visits a call centre of the French Social security insurance dedicated to Covid-19 vaccinations, Monday, March 29, 2021 in Creteil, outside Paris.

Macron was widely expected to announce new social distancing measures. Even before the surge, caused by the British and South African variants of the virus, COVID-19 death tolls were nearing one million in Europe and 100,000 in France. But with only 5 percent of France's population fully vaccinated, cases have tripled since March 7, from 21,825 to 59,038 yesterday, according to Public Health France. This is equivalent to 300,000 in a country the size of the United States.

Before Macron's speech, leading medical authorities demanded, one after the other, a strict lockdown. Epidemiologist Dominique Costagliola denounced Macron's refusal to impose a lockdown in January, when two-thirds of the French public was polled as supporting a lockdown, adding: "It is naive to claim Macron is an epidemiologist." Paris Public Hospitals, 90 percent of whose intensive care beds are already taken by 1,484 patients, warned that they are only days away from denying lifesaving care to thousands of critically ill patients.

The head of France's Association of Doctors, Patrick Bouet, wrote to Macron an open letter. "Life can tolerate today no arbitrage, no hesitation, no betting," he said. Insisting one can "still prevent the virus engulfing everyone," he added, "a true lock-down everywhere is needed."

The response of France's "president of the rich" must be taken as a warning to workers not only in France, but internationally: the ruling class acts with utter contempt for human life. Macron's speech, no doubt coordinated with the European Union (EU) and Washington, was an unambiguous refusal to take any meaningful action to halt mass deaths.

Macron acknowledged there is an "acceleration due to the variant that threatens to make us lose control if we do nothing." However, he proposed only a one-week closure of schools before the spring holidays, followed by a week of distance learning for high school students after that. He also closed nonessential retail stores, while pledging that cultural venues and restaurants, which spread COVID-19, would reopen in May.

Macron's attempt to pass this off as a lockdown is a fraud.

In March 2020, as COVID-19 spread across Europe and America, wildcat strikes broke out in factories in Italy and the United States and spread internationally. As France's Medef business federation warned of "an extremely brutal shift in workers' attitudes" and that management "can no longer continue production due to pressure from the workers," Macron agreed to a strict, eight-week lockdown, closing schools and all nonessential production. Such lockdowns dramatically slashed the spread of the coronavirus not only in France, but across much of Europe.

Now, however, as thousands face a denial of lifesaving care in a wealthy European country, Macron is refusing to stop nonessential production and has closed schools for less than two weeks.

Macron also shamelessly applauded his own disastrous policy, claiming that he was "taking into account the consequences of restrictions on our children, on their education, on the economy, on society, on mental health." Had he spoken honestly, Macron would have said he was "taking into account the consequences of social distancing restrictions on our companies, their profits, and our fortunes." Schools and nonessential production are being kept open—not based on scientific evidence—but to ensure that corporate profits keep flowing into the financial markets.

Macron's open contempt for medical experts and public opinion, however, is only an especially tactless version of the policy pursued by the bourgeoisie across Europe. The same day Macron spoke, German Chancellor Angela Merkel was interviewed on television and refused to say how or when a lockdown could be implemented in Germany. Then yesterday, the director of Germany's intensive care registry, Christian Karagiannidis, warned *Tagesschau* that in four weeks all intensive care beds would be full in Germany.

Tens of millions of workers in France and across Europe are being brought face to face with the fact that the EU is implementing a policy of social murder.

The outcome, and how many lives can be saved, will depend on how quickly the working class can intervene independently, mobilizing in struggle against the capitalist governments of Europe for a scientifically-guided policy on the pandemic.

This requires independent organizations of struggle and an internationalist and socialist perspective for struggle against capitalism. In the wake of the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, pseudo-left academics and anti-Marxists declared that humanity had arrived at the “end of history” and the class struggle; capitalist democracy would reign. What followed were decades of imperialist wars, economic crisis, and rising social inequality and austerity that have devastated basic health infrastructure. The pandemic has now torn the mask off of European capitalism.

In March 2020, the *World Socialist Web Site* analyzed the catastrophic failure of the pandemic response in America in a column titled “Capitalism is at war with society,” writing:

“These four decades have revealed all the socially reactionary characteristics of a system based on private ownership of the means of production, in which all considerations of social need are subordinated to the drive for profit and vast personal wealth. The motto of the capitalist oligarchy is: ‘If the accumulation of our billions requires the death of millions, so be it.’”

The last year has vindicated this assessment. European capitalism’s pretensions as the kinder, gentler version of its American cousin have been exposed as a fraud. The European Central Bank, the Bank of England, and European governments poured trillions of euros and pounds into bank and corporate bailouts. While individual financial aristocrats made fortunes, with France’s Bernard Arnault raking in €30 billion last year, countless thousands were left to die, based on false claims that society cannot afford lockdowns.

Workers struggles against the policy of social murder can only be waged independently of its accomplices in the union bureaucracies, and their supporters in their pseudo-left political allies like France’s New Anti-capitalist Party or Germany’s Left Party. France’s Stalinist General Confederation of Labor and the German Trade Union Federation isolated the wildcat strikes in March. They then signed EU bailouts and helped implement the back-to-school policies that played a critical role in the resurgence of the pandemic after the spring 2020 lockdown.

In March 2020, wildcat strikes compelled a lockdown last year in much of Europe, but this last year has shown the fatal limits of spontaneous struggle. Without a socialist perspective and their own organizations of struggle, workers were subordinated to reactionary manoeuvres of the governments, banks and trade unions who implemented a “herd immunity” policy.

It is critical for workers to build their own rank-and-file safety committees in workplaces in France and across Europe, fighting for a lockdown to halt the contagion until the population can be vaccinated. The entire population must be provided with a comfortable living wage so that they can shelter at home, with nonessential production closed and a massive investment in resources for online learning. This requires a struggle by the French and European working class for state power, expropriating the financial aristocracy and replacing the EU with the United Socialist States of Europe.

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