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French Holocaust survivor condemns far-right anti-vaccine protests

On Sunday, July 18, a memorial service was held at the Square of Jewish Martyrs in Paris. This was part of the commemorations marking Memorial Day for the victims of racism and anti-Semitism in France. This occurred one day after Saturday's far-right protests against the Macron government's planned "health pass," which will require individuals to present confirmation of double vaccination against COVID-19 or a negative test to enter a range of public venues.

At this ceremony, 94-year-old Holocaust survivor Joseph Szwarc publicly denounced the comparisons made at the protest between anti-vaccination campaigners and the 6 million European Jews murdered during the Second World War. Of the 75,000 French Jews rounded up by Vichy French and Nazi forces and deported, only 3,000 returned to France at the war's end. The Nazi-collaborationist Vichy regime required Jews in France to wear a yellow star, singling them out for public hatred and deportation to the death camps.

The anti-"health pass" protests were called by leading neo-fascists, including Marion Maréchal Le Pen and Florian Philippot, the head of the neo-fascist Patriots Party. Tens of thousands of people marched throughout France, with far-right marchers joined by libertarian or pseudo-left middle-class groups opposed to vaccinations. The protests were also endorsed by several figures of Jean-Luc Melenchon's Unsubmissive France (*La France insoumise*—LFI) party.



A star that reads “not vaccinated” is attached on the back of an anti-vaccine protester during a rally in Paris, Saturday, July 17, 2021 [Credit: AP Photo/Michel Euler, File]

Several of the far-right march’s attendees were photographed wearing yellow stars of David with “not vaccinated” or “without vaccines” written at the centre of the star. Two regional vaccination centres in the Isère and Pyrénées were vandalized by protesters, one of which was graffitied with a reference to the Nazi occupation of France.

Referring to the far-right protests, Szwarc stated: “I would like to say how indignant I am about what has happened this week. You can’t imagine how moved I was by it.” Holding up an image of a Star of David that had been edited by protesters in aforementioned fashion, he added, “This comparison is odious!”

Speaking to applause, Szwarc continued, “We must all stand up against this ignominy. Tears came to me, I wore the star, I know what it is, I still have it in my flesh. It is the duty of all of us not to let this outrageous, anti-Semitic, racist wave pass. I believe that it is a primordial duty.”

On July 16, 1942, Szwarc was one of 13,152 Jews apprehended in Paris by French police in the infamous Vel d’Hiv round-up, named after the Winter Stadium in which prisoners were detained before being deported to concentration camps. This action was carried out by Paris police, the Gendarmerie and the fascist thugs from the French Popular Party. Beginning at 4:00 a.m. these forces rampaged through neighbourhoods with Jewish populations, arresting anyone they could find with a Jewish background.

Almost all those arrested in this raid were eventually sent to the Auschwitz extermination camp. Of the 3,900 children rounded up during the Vel d'Hiv raid, only six survived.

The comparison between the Holocaust and a scientific response to the COVID-19 pandemic has not been limited to France. Last week, anti-lockdown protesters in the Netherlands carried signs reading, "we will be the new Anne Frank." Fascist US congresswoman and QAnon conspiracy theory promoter Marjorie Taylor Greene stated in May this year: "Vaccinated employees get a vaccination logo just like the Nazis forced Jewish people to wear a gold star."

Foul comparisons between life-saving vaccines and the Holocaust trivialize the most horrific crimes of the 20th century. The political impetus for them comes from the far right's desire to give a populist-libertarian veneer to the herd immunity policy pursued by the European ruling class throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. This policy aims to keep workers in nonessential industries on the job, making profits for investors, even after over 1.1 million people have died of COVID-19 in Europe.

Szwarc's comments are a rare expression of the mass sentiment among workers and significant sections of the middle class against the ruling class' herd immunity policy and the normalization and promotion of far-right forces in French and European political life. While far-right resistance to mandatory vaccination has dominated the French and international press, over 60 percent of the population supports this measure.

The Twitter account of the Auschwitz Memorial Museum endorsed Szwarc's remarks against these odious comparisons, adding, "Instrumentalization of the tragedy of all people who between 1933-45 suffered, were humiliated, tortured & murdered by the hateful totalitarian regime of Nazi Germany to argue against vaccination that saves human lives is a sad symptom of moral and intellectual decline."

Historian and Nazi hunter Serge Klarsfeld also criticized the analogy and the anti-democratic demands of anti-vaccination protesters. He said, "the yellow star was a symbol of death that excluded Jews from society and marked them for extermination, while vaccines, on the other hand, save lives." He added: "What freedom is it they seek? The freedom to be contagious?"

Mandatory vaccination against COVID-19, which is already legally required for 11 other diseases in France, is a crucial scientific measure to combat the spread of the deadly virus. However, it must be paired with a shutdown of all nonessential production and service, an effective test-and-trace system and full income for all in order to control the spread of the virus.

The Socialist Equality Party does not support Macron's "health pass," which aims to facilitate a full opening the economy, not to control and eradicate the coronavirus. Even if millions more were vaccinated, this will not suffice to eliminate the virus. With over 21,000 cases recorded in France on July 22 and the threat of vaccine-resistant variants, Macron's policy of letting the virus spread freely in a largely unvaccinated population is set to lead to thousands of deaths.

Anti-vaccine protests have been supported by forces promoted as left-wing by the French political establishment, including Jean-Luc Mélenchon's Unsubmissive France. Szwarc's comments again underscore the political and moral bankruptcy of this pseudo-left party, whose leaders carry out their political manoeuvres with contempt for European workers' struggles against fascism in the 20th century and for their health today.

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