

Macron Government Ending France's Coronavirus Lockdown Beginning this Monday

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In a televised address on Thursday afternoon, Prime Minister Édouard Philippe and five other ministers confirmed that President Emmanuel Macron had given the order for an end to confinement and the reopening of the economy on May 11. The government's reckless decision, taken in the defence council in line with similar measures underway across Europe and the US, puts countless lives at risk.

In the United States, senior Trump administration officials declare that ending confinement means Americans must get used to 3,000 people in the country dying every day.

While the lockdown that began in France on March 17 is still reducing the number of new cases and deaths, the "first wave" of the pandemic is not over, neither in France nor in Europe. On Wednesday, 3,640 new cases of COVID-19 were announced in France. On the day of Philippe's speech, there were 28,490 new cases throughout Europe, including more than 17,000 outside Russia. Philippe announced the end to lockdown while admitting that he expected many new cases and did not know what the consequences of the deconfinement would be.

"In three weeks, at the end of May, we will know exactly where we stand," he said. "We will know whether or not we have managed to contain the epidemic. We will know the rate of contamination and hospital and intensive care unit entries... If these numbers and figures remain low, we will be able to congratulate ourselves and move into the next phase, expanding our freedom in many areas that are particularly important for the coming summer. If not, we will draw the consequences and adapt."

Philippe's cynical argument that the government would blindly embark on a deconfinement imposed by fate not only displays indifference to human lives; it is also false. It is precisely in such circumstances that epidemic models are used to inform decisions. Yet multiple studies show that deconfinement will lead to a massive rebound of the epidemic in the best of cases.

A study by the Assistance Publique-Hôpitaux de Paris (AP-HP) modelled the spread of the virus in a population with the protection envisaged by Macron: masks, screening of patients, and social distancing. While approximately 25,000 deaths from COVID-19 have been recorded in France, the study predicts between 33,500 and 87,100 new deaths in France from May to December 2020.

The study concluded that even in an optimistic scenario in which social distancing measures

are effective, the influx of new cases would be so strong that serious cases would overflow the emergency room as early as July. "In this scenario, further containment would be inevitable," said Nicolas Hoertel, a psychiatrist at AP-HP and a co-author of the study.

Another study by INSERM and the Sorbonne predicts that a resumption of classes by all students would provoke an epidemic wave that would overwhelm the intensive care units, taking up 138 percent of hospital capacity. If only 25 per cent of students resumed classes, this wave could rise to only 72 percent of capacity. It is unclear how workers could return to work if three-quarters of their children stayed home.

One of the authors of the study, Vittoria Colizza, pointed to the risk that "we may have to face a second wave that would be more intense than the first beginning at the end of June, with hospital reanimation resources overwhelmed until August."

The indifference and contempt of the government for the lives of the workers are obvious. The ruling class is, moreover, aware of its own criminality. That is why the Senate voted a preventive amnesty for any health crime committed during the pandemic.

This indifference is so blatant that it has provoked criticism even within the state apparatus.

"The government announced this Thursday afternoon that it wants to end the lockdown in departments classified as red, where the virus is strongest. This is sheer madness," said Frédéric Bierry, president of the Bas-Rhin Departmental Council in Alsace, a region hard hit by the disease. He cited an epidemiological study that "shows that the risk is to suffer another health catastrophe with more deaths."

However, Bierry refused to call for collective opposition to deconfinement, limiting himself to proposing health security measures already proposed by the government: wearing masks, protection of the elderly or people at risk, and personal protective actions such as coughing into one's elbow.

The only consistent and viable opposition to Macron's policy comes from the working class. Already widely hated before the pandemic as president of the rich, Macron is imposing a murderous policy on workers who, although subject to a constant barrage of media propaganda supporting the end to the lockdown, are largely suspicious of it.

The government's assertions that the resumption of classes and the intermixing of students will not propagate the virus, or that social distancing will be possible in crowded public transport, are not credible. According to a YouGov poll, 76 per cent of the French population believe classes should not resume before September. Another 59 per cent say they are "worried" about the May 11 deconfinement deadline.

The endangerment of tens of thousands of lives in France, and millions of lives in America and Europe, is not an economic and social necessity, but a political decision dictated by the selfish concerns of the financial aristocracy. The central banks of the US and eurozone are showering states and large companies with trillions of dollars and euros. However, apart from the small portions of this money being allocated to unemployment payments, almost all this money does not reach workers or small businesses.

Workers and small businesses are being driven to hunger or bankruptcy by the drastic

shutdown of the economy, while the banks and the super-rich are lining their pockets and refusing to help workers or provide support to small business.

Speaking before the Senate on Monday, Philippe claimed that deconfinement was dictated by the need to protect France:

“This situation cannot continue. The flagships of our industry are under threat: aeronautics, the automobile industry and electronics. Small business, medium-sized businesses and start-ups are on the verge of suffocation. Everything that contributes to France’s influence—tourism, art, gastronomy—is at a standstill.”

If the economic situation for broad sections of workers is catastrophic, it is because the Macron government, like its counterparts in Europe, has done virtually nothing to improve the conditions for the working class.

As for the statements by other ministers speaking alongside Philippe, they merely underscored the massive contradictions underlying the government’s policy. They proposed the mass use of masks, even though the government had previously maintained—while it had a complete lack of mask stockpiles—that masks served no purpose for the general population. They proposed to limit virus transmission by reducing public transport use to 15 per cent of its normal level, without explaining how workers would go to work or their shops.

Perhaps the greatest cynicism came from the Minister of Labour, Muriel Pénicaud, who praised the collaboration of the state and employers with the trade union movement.

“The health of workers has never been and will never be a negotiable variable,” she said, before adding that “social dialogue [was] essential to implement these measures.”

The conditions for deconfinement and a safe return to work are not in place. Workers have every right to refuse to return to work, to thwart government policy and the ruling class’ blatant disregard for their lives. This requires the organisation of struggles independently of the trade union apparatuses and a perspective for a socialist struggle to transfer political power to the working class in Europe and the world.

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