Macron government uses more lies to push May 11 return to work

By Will Morrow
25 April 2020

The administration of French President Emmanuel Macron is aggressively promoting a full reopening of the economy on May 11 that will directly lead to thousands of additional coronavirus deaths. The government is relying on the trade unions to suppress widespread opposition in the working class to the end of confinement and force workers back to their jobs.

The government has announced that it will provide more details about its plan for an end to confinement early next week, most likely on Tuesday. Last Thursday, in a call with local elected officials across the country, Macron clarified that the reopening of schools on May 11 would not be obligatory for all, but would be “done voluntarily,” with parents given the choice of keeping their children at home.

This only ensures that those who return their children to school come mainly from the working class and the poorest segments of the population, who will not have the choice to work from home beginning on May 11, or conduct homeschooling or of otherwise minding their children. The government is cynically exploiting the fact that thousands of families depend on 1-euro subsidized lunch programs provided by school cafeterias to feed their children. They will have little choice but to send them back to school to eat.

Over the past week, the government has stepped up its propaganda agitating for a reopening of schools. Macron’s Health Minister Olivier Véran gave an interview on France Inter’s morning program yesterday that was remarkable only for the number of lies he was able to fit into a 10-minute segment.

Although the role of children as asymptomatic carriers of the virus remains undetermined by scientists, Veran downplayed the potential impact of reopening classes. “There is the question of whether children are contagious or not,” he said. “This question has been asked often for many weeks. Here too there are arguments both for and against (emphasis added). The latest scientific arguments that have come to me say that for children under 10 transmit the virus less than adults. … That is why we are working with measures that are very operational, which will permit us to provide for safe teaching of the students.”

When the journalist asked him to specify the measures he was referring to, Veran refused, declaring instead that “children must return to the school. … At a certain point, they will have to return progressively to a school setting.” At another point in the interview, he argued that small children were very good at learning social distancing measures. He added that, in any case, reopening schools was necessary to “combat inequality,” with first priority for a return to classes for “those children in difficulty, those in trouble at home, and we have to provide the means, and … pose the conditions that would permit children to return to school.”

Veran said that while it would be many months before a vaccine could be created and reliably mass produced, “In the meantime, we will have to live with the virus.”

In other words, the virus and its deadly toll must come to be seen as a part of daily life. The maintenance of confinement “is a complicated question,” he continued. “We cannot confine half the planet for six months or a year, until there is a vaccine; and since we are not sure that a confinement would stop the spread of the virus. … We are obliged at each step to measure what we are doing in order to have a major positive health impact for France, but without having too much of an impact on the other side.”

Veran had directly contradicted his own claim that a prolonged confinement may not stop or severely limit
the spread of the virus, earlier in the same interview, when he said he accepted a new model released by a mathematical team in France this week, estimating that at least 60,000 additional lives in the country had been saved due to the confinement.

However, his comment that a confinement may have “too much of an impact on the other side” means, in plain language, that although tens of thousands of lives would be saved, these must be weighed against the potential damage to French corporate profits due to a prolonged shutdown of the economy.

As for Veran’s statement that nonessential production could not be stopped until a vaccine is produced, this is simply based on the premise that capitalist property and the financial elite’s monopolization of social resources must remain inviolable. The wealth of the 40 wealthiest individuals in France on Forbes’ 2019 rich list totaled over 288 billion euros—more than 10 times the amount allocated by the Macron administration toward limited unemployment payments in the past three months.

Veran admitted that the government had no clear idea of the number of cases in France, which means that it has no idea how quickly the virus will spread with the end of the confinement. “I do not know exactly how many French people are infected,” he said. “We have models, we have studies, but I’ve learned with this virus to remain extremely cautious towards data that isn’t set in stone.”

Anger is growing in the working class over the criminal policies of the Macron administration. Yesterday, the weekly Le Canard Enchaîné cited a letter written April 18 by Georges-François Leclerc, the police prefect of Seine-Saint-Denis north of Paris, stating that 15,000-20,000 workers were unable to feed themselves properly due to the administration’s refusal to provide adequate support throughout the lockdown, with children and students who rely on school programs most at risk. Leclerc reportedly warned of mass riots and a social explosion, warning: “What was achievable in a month of confinement cannot be maintained for two.”

This week has already seen the eruption of protests and unrest in the impoverished suburbs around Paris and other major cities against police violence and social inequality.

The Macron administration is depending upon its close collaboration with the trade unions to suppress the opposition in the working class and force workers back to work.

While making empty criticisms of the return to work, the CGT is supporting it in practice and closely collaborating with Macron. Yesterday, CGT President Philippe Martinez gave an interview with Sud Radio in which he declared that he believed schools should not be opened until September because it would be unsafe for teachers because of the propagation of the virus.

Asked by radio host Patrick Roger if he would therefore call on teachers to refuse to open schools, Martinez scoffed and replied, “No, no, I think I have already explained it clearly: We are calling on people to work insofar as the conditions are safe.” The CGT is already overseeing the return to work of autoworkers, with Toyota reopening one of its assembly lines in Onnaing on Thursday.

Calling for further collaboration with Macron, Martinez said that “even though during this period we have had a bit more contact with the government, in any case I hope that after this crisis the government and the president of the republic will consider that the trade unions are useful.”

The fight against a return to work cannot be conducted through the trade unions, which are the allies of the government and the employers against the working class. Workers need their own organizations, independent action committees, to organize an industrial and political offensive against any return to work in industries that are nonessential for the fight against the virus. This must be connected to a socialist program for a workers government, the expropriation of the capitalist class and devotion of society’s resources toward the fight against the pandemic, including the guarantee of decent living conditions to all workers and safe working conditions in essential industries.

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