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Covid-19 pandemic in France

In France, facing the coronavirus: lies, incompetence and social reaction

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The beginning of the first phase of mitigating some of the measures taken to deal with the coronavirus epidemic starts on 11 May. This deadline has been prepared by the French government in a haphazard manner and the polls show deep distrust on the part of the majority of the population. [1]

Faced with the coronavirus, the French government, under the impulsion of President Emmanuel Macron and directly led by Prime Minister Edouard Philippe, has been a combination of incompetence, lies and hesitation, while a state of health emergency has been put in place, including both measures to fight the pandemic and provisions that infringe on freedoms and the provisions of the Labour Code.

Three elements of context

Three elements of context are important to understand the situation. First of all, there is budgetary management governed by austerity, which has persisted for many years, whether the right or the “left” are in power. The cut in the health budget hit hospitals hard, with the closure or dismantling of services, staff reductions, and a big reduction in the number of beds. For more than a year, the government has remained deaf to the demands from personnel working in EHPADs (care homes for dependent elderly people) and hospitals. However, several months ago, a banner in a demonstration of health workers warned: “You count your money, tomorrow you will count our dead”. The issue of medical masks also illustrates how the government has been running things. Whereas in 2009, according to a report from the French Senate, following the H1N1 flu, the state owned 723 million FFP2 masks (the most effective) and one billion surgical masks, this stock had decreased in early 2019 to 150 million surgical masks and no FFP2 masks. Where had the masks gone? Out of date, scattered everywhere, lost.... In fact, the neo-liberals' assumption was that the state did not need a strategic stock: if a new epidemic occurred, masks would always be found cheaply in China.

Second element, the consequences of capitalist globalization on the production of drugs. For years, there have been shortages in the supply of various drugs, even very basic ones. Several reports (from the Academy of Pharmacy in 2013 and from the Senate in 2018) had warned of dependence on imports for the active ingredients used in the pharmaceutical industry. The French state, concerned above all to play the game of the market and in no way to interfere with private enterprises, watched without intervening the deterioration and closure of various production units: notably those producing the active substance of the drug doliprane, medical masks and oxygen tanks. The materials and substances necessary for the tests are practically no longer produced in France.

Third element: the nature of government under Emmanuel Macron. In the first round of the presidential elections of 2017 he had won the support of 18 per cent of registered voters and had owed his election in the second round especially to the rejection of Marine le Pen and to the crisis of the parties that had governed before him: the Republicans (LR, right) and the Socialist Party (PS). Macron had been a senior civil servant and then an investment banker, before being appointed a minister by Hollande. His role is above all to be the authorized representative of capital to put an end to what it considers to be the French “lateness” and, to this end, to break social resistance. To do this, he has made wide use of the police against the four major social movements of his presidency: against the “softening” of the Labour Code, “the Yellow Jackets movement”, the mobilizations against the reform of the SNCF (the public railway company) and against pension reform. For such a person and his entourage of technocrats and careerists (partly from the PS), health is a cost and the sick (like the unemployed and the beneficiaries of social benefits) are a dead weight on the budget: they are therefore not really prepared to handle a health crisis.

In fact, everything happened as in a play with four acts.

The first two acts of the tragedy

At first, in January and early February, the French authorities completely underestimated the problem: it concerned the Chinese, the countries of Southeast Asia, then the Italians. The Chinese eat pangolin, Italian grandparents often take care of their grandchildren.... In France, "it's not the same". The first three officially registered cases (on 24 January) were therefore not considered to herald a possible extension of the epidemic to the territory of France, especially since they were French people of Chinese origin. At the same time, officials and many doctors who were interviewed in the media downplayed the severity of the illness, compared to the flu that returns every year.

The French government was therefore preparing little or nothing to deal with an extension of the epidemic in France. And the lies began. Minister of Health Agnès Buzyn declared on 26 January: "We have tens of millions of masks in stock in the event of an epidemic, these are things that have already been planned. If one day we had to tell one or other part of the population or person at risk to wear masks, the health authorities would distribute these masks to people who need them."

In February, the state gradually became aware of the risk of an epidemic, but the measures taken remained derisory (orders for masks that were far from covering the needs of medical staff, which were estimated at 40 million per week). Without saying so explicitly (unlike in Britain), everything happened as if the government was playing the card of herd immunity: let the epidemic spread, while preventing hospitals from being overwhelmed. Because there is a problem: the reduction in hospital beds has resulted in France having only 5,000 resuscitation beds, as against more than 25,000 in Germany. The other parameter is the concern not to take measures likely to weaken already shaky economic growth. The reassuring statements continued on the part of the government, while the shortages of masks and hydroalcoholic gels were more and more patent.

In any case, the main concerns of the French government at the time were of another order: breaking the social movement against pension reform and limiting the foreseeable failure of LREM (the Republic on the Move, the party of Emmanuel Macron) in the municipal elections. On 16 February 2020, the Minister of Health left her post to become head of the LREM list for the municipal elections in Paris. However, the government had all the means necessary for understanding the risks of the situation. [2]

On 25 February the first French death was recorded unrelated to Chinese territory, and in the following days, the number of cases detected increased. On Saturday 29 February an extraordinary Council of Ministers officially met to discuss the coronavirus; in fact, it also discussed pension reform and ways to speed up its adoption by the Macronist majority in Parliament. The action of the government aimed to control the various local clusters of the epidemic to avoid it spreading throughout the country. Although the number of cases and deaths was increasing (and well-known personalities were being discreetly tested while the tests were unavailable, including for health personnel), on 7 March in Paris, the President declared that "there is no reason, apart from vulnerable populations, to modify our habits of going out".

Third act: " We are at war

Then, faced with the concern that was spreading among the population and the risk of saturation of hospitals due to the increase in the number of cases, on 12 March the discourse changed. On 10 March emphasis was placed on the

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need for “barrier gestures” (not shaking hands or kissing, etc.) and a “Scientific Council” was created to advise the President. On 12 March Emmanuel Macron announced a series of measures: the entire school system was closed, all companies could postpone the payment of social contributions and taxes, a massive mechanism of partial unemployment was put in place (wages were taken charge of by the state (up to about 80 per cent) and not by the company, teleworking was encouraged. The Ministry of Health requested the deprogramming of non-emergency surgical procedures. Gatherings of more than 100 people were prohibited. But the first round of the municipal elections was maintained on 15 March (which caused a significant degree of contamination).

On 16 March in a new intervention, Emmanuel Macron repeated several times “France is at war” and announced the beginning of the lockdown (*confinement*) of the population (limitation of movements, etc.). The stated objective was to slow the spread of the virus. The number of deaths was increasing and the hospitals were overwhelmed ... and the truncated or false information continued.

The daily number of deaths announced each evening initially included only deaths in hospitals; later, deaths in retirement homes were added, but the figures were incomplete; lastly, deaths at home were still not recorded,

Faced with shortages of masks and testing, the government repeated that this was not a problem because it was useless to test widely and that wearing a mask was also useless, even counterproductive.

In fact, while only activities essential to the life of the population were supposed to continue, the government wanted to keep cessation of work to a minimum: on 19 March the Minister of Labour spoke of “defeatism” in relation to the building sector, which had stopped work on construction sites. Big companies were trying to start up again and were prevented from doing so, totally or partially, by the refusal of their workers. Companies benefited from significant government aid.

The “war” announced by Macron coexisted with a concern not to impose anything on companies, none of which were requisitioned to produce what would be necessary to fight the pandemic. If some of them reconverted their production, it was on their own initiative or on the basis of commercial contracts with the state. The government’s incompetence was demonstrated by the way it handled orders of masks from China and an order of 10,000 respirators from French manufacturers: around 8,500 of them turned out to be unsuitable for the care of patients suffering from coronavirus.

Those who suffered from the “war” were above all the popular classes. Precarious or self-employed workers were concerned neither by partial unemployment nor by aid to companies. Hospital and retirement home workers, rubbish collectors, supermarket workers, delivery workers, etc., are often poorly paid. Macron and his ministers pay homage to them hypocritically for their dedication without granting them any wage increases, only an exceptional bonus, while these workers are doubly exposed to the coronavirus: during their work and during the necessary transport time to get there. Among them, there is a large proportion of women. According to a document of 2 April from the Scientific Council, among workers, 35 per cent worked outside the home, 60 per cent declared that they were not working and 5 per cent were doing telework. Compared to this, 10 per cent of executives were working outside the home, 24 per cent were not working, and 66 per cent were doing telework. Finally, people occupying apartments that are too small and residents of working-class neighbourhoods who are more subject to police checks (and therefore at risk of being stopped and fined for breaching lockdown) than those who live in more bourgeois neighbourhoods. We should add to those who are particularly victims of lockdown the homeless, the imprisoned, patients in psychiatric hospitals, asylum seekers, etc.

On 22 March Parliament, sitting with very limited participation and debating at an accelerated pace, adopted a law establishing a state of health emergency, authorizing the government to govern by ordinances. Its field of application is very wide and includes the possibility, in principle for a limited period, of restriction of freedoms and suspension of

the rules of the Labour Code (working hours could, for example, be temporarily fixed at 60 hours per week). Beyond the fight against the epidemic, what we have here is actually a limitation of the freedom of action of trade unions and social movements (as seen on 1 May) and the preparation of the conditions for the hoped-for recovery of the economy.

Fourth act: towards lifting lockdown?

On 13 April Macron announced that lifting lockdown would begin on 11 May and gave the government the task of developing a plan to make it happen.

From there, disorder has characterized the communication of the government and the President. Nothing is clear. Easing restrictions will be done differently according to the regions. Conflicting indications are given about the reopening of the school system. Mayors do not want the government to take responsibility away from them. As for urban transport, its use will probably be risky. All economic activities are expected to restart on 11 May, with the exception of cafes, restaurants and cinemas.

On tests and masks, the government has now changed its doctrine: it will be necessary to test and for people to wear masks (compulsorily in public transport). But there are not enough tests, despite reassuring statements. As for masks, the French government has invented a new category: the “general public” cloth mask, washable and of uncertain effectiveness.

Basically, it is a question, for the government and the employers, of restarting the economy without changing the logic that amplified the disaster. It is far too early to write in France (and elsewhere) the obituary of neoliberalism, as a number of sometimes interesting texts and manifestos tend to do, but which all too often pass from a correct “it cannot last” to an illusory “it will not last”. As if neoliberalism and capitalism could collapse by themselves. The future will be played out in the field of social confrontation. In any case, those who rule are preparing to defend their order. Moreover, the police and the gendarmerie recently placed orders for drones and tear gas....

5 May 2020

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[1] A recent poll shows 66 per cent of the population are critical of the government's handling of the crisis: *Le Figaro* 10 May 2020 "[Coronavirus : les Français sont les plus sévères d'Europe envers leurs dirigeants](#)" (The French are the most critical in Europe of their leaders). *IVP*

[2] As an example, on this same date 16 February, Pierre Rousset published a text containing information on the coronavirus and warning against the possible expansion of the epidemic in France. What a political activist with limited means could understand was much more possible for the government. See "[Coronavirus \(2019-nCoV or Covid-19\) in France: medical information, thoughts and practical advice](#)". A researcher, Pascal Marichalar, denounced in an article published on 25 March the inaction of the government with the available scientific information ; "[Savoir et prévoir \(France\) : Première chronologie de l'émergence du Covid-19](#)" (Know and predict (France) : First chronology of the emergence of Covid-19).