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France

Neither Covid nor Macron

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The French government's negligence in the area of health and its authoritarian methods are causing growing mistrust and frontal opposition among an increasing proportion of the population. This is embodied in major demonstrations against the health pass and the threats it poses to employees and the most precarious. Against the authoritarianism of these methods, should be stressed the need for a generalization of vaccination and the means to implement it, while highlighting the links between capitalism and this pandemic – as is unfortunately probably the case with those of the future. The situation requires a clear policy based on emancipation from the logic of private interests and unlimited profit.

The demonstrations triggered by the diktats concerning the compulsory health pass and denouncing the police state methods of President Macron and education minister Blanquer, the blackmail of dismissal or suspension of wages, are justified. However, the contradictory aspects of these demonstrations obviously make it necessary to put forward a global logic regarding the action to be taken against the pandemic.

This requires two complementary priorities:

- a public health policy and general vaccination of the population to fight Covid 19 and protect against it. A health policy that does not only set itself the goal of avoiding hospitalizations and the saturation of resuscitation services, but a policy of zero Covid that aims to eradicate the pandemic in France and around the world (as has practically been the case for other pandemics). Hence the link with the campaign for the lifting of patents, while the countries of Europe and North America have monopolized the bulk of the doses, protecting the big pharma trusts and blocking free access to vaccines for other continents
- rejection of Macron's policy and the health pass, of a vaccination made indirectly mandatory in a hypocritical and guilty way, for care workers, high school students and those in places of leisure, with the threat of the suspension of the employment contract and the dismissal of employees. A criminalising policy which makes health control a matter of public order and which turns its back on a genuine vaccination and public health policy, which must reach out to those who are the least vaccinated and, often, most at risk. Worse still, the policy of health passes and paid PCR tests creates a dynamic of avoidance, leading patients to hide their disease, others to look for false health passes, others finally to cease testing or treatment, including for other diseases.

These two demands are presented as contradictory both by the government and by the antivax campaigners, the supporters of general vaccination having to support the obligatory health pass while its opponents ignore the imperative of vaccination in the name of "individual freedom".

We must reject this binary schema and be at the same time

- for public health and social protection services organising a general vaccination against Covid (including the youngest)
- and for the rejection of the government's authoritarian methods which strengthen the policing and security system developed by Macron and serve as a substitute for an organised vaccination campaign.

We cannot be vague on either of these positions. We must manage them, including in the demonstrations, while trying to give a progressive political dynamic to the current reactions and mobilizations against the health pass and government measures, demonstrations that will continue in the coming weeks (despite the month of August and the entry into force of the pass), relying in particular on the unitary appeal against the government's measures.

Not to beat around the bush, we must clearly say that we are in favour of implementing, through a systematic campaign, the collective vaccination of the entire population against Covid (and certainly that this campaign should be extended by the necessary boosters this autumn), in order to make infection as marginal as possible. This presupposes a systematic organisation of vaccination (whereas today it is essentially based on an individual approach, in particular by making appointments via the Internet on Doctolib), by an active policy of the health services and social security, aimed at unvaccinated people, the people and generations who have remained the most excluded from vaccination, by organising campaigns, not of guilt and threats, but of the necessary transparency, information and conviction. This is not a question of policing or blackmail in employment or education. A large majority of the population is in favour of vaccination and France's delay, compared to the EU average, in the number of people vaccinated is due more to lack of organisation and resources than to the reluctance of the population. There is no need to revisit the history of the government's vacillations, seeking to constantly hide, by false pretexts, the absence of masks, tests, vaccines and the organisation of mass vaccination. It is, for example, only since early April that 35 major vaccination centres have been opened (previously denounced as "vaccinodromes" by the government), since 16 April that those under 70 without comorbidity factor can make an appointment to be vaccinated (!!!!), since 15 June that 12-17 years can be vaccinated. Similarly, we remember the insistence for months that young people were not at risk, justifying the absence of real health protocols in middle and high schools. Over the months, the government itself has floated complacently about the reluctance to vaccinate the population generally, instead of clearly saying that it should organize global vaccination to combat the virus.

We are not agnostic about the place of vaccinations in health policies. It is not an individual choice, an opinion left to the freedom and choice of each individual. It is a public health issue. This has always been the case (in the absence of medical contra-indication to vaccination) and childhood vaccinations have only ever received marginal refusals (even the introduction of 11 compulsory vaccines four years ago which was done in an equally authoritarian way with total complacency for the pharmaceutical trusts and without any democracy on the usefulness of new vaccines and the use of adjuvants). But during 18 months of the Covid pandemic, treatments and vaccines have, especially in France with Macron's mistakes, fed scepticism, conspiracy theories and the antivax movement. If these go beyond the usual circles, it is because the conspiracy theories (very much present among employees, and even in our trade union circles) have been reinforced by all the errors of government communication, the contradictory statements and decisions of president Macron, prime minister Castex and co. But it is also the boomerang effect of the lack of transparency and association of the people in every aspect in relation to Covid, the profit seeking of the pharmaceutical trusts, often at the expense of patients' health, scandals created by the marketing or misuse of various medicines (such as Mediator, Levothyrox new formula or Distilbene), and the lack of action by the public authorities in these cases. The same is true of the Chlordecone scandal in the West Indies, which has fuelled the reluctance of part of the population to vaccinate. All this has largely eroded the credibility of government communications in the medical field, linked to the lack of transparency and a policy truly independent of the pharmaceutical trusts. Finally, the cacophony of scientific communication has allowed some social networks and channels such as CNews and BFM to create a fog and a lack of rational benchmarks for part of the population, with no voice and no information being more credible than another. In general, the loss of credibility of political leaders, the disorganization and lack of resources of health and social security services, their increasing physical distancing from the population, linked to the weakness of a social and workers' movement with an audible voice, have accentuated this phenomenon.

It is therefore vital that a clear and audible voice is heard on public health issues. It must make the link between the requirements in this area and the fight for a society based on common goods, public and transparent management of all production and services vital to the population. This applies equally to the fields of health, transport and energy. Similarly, the pandemic highlights the living conditions of the working classes, concentrating several factors that aggravate vulnerability to viruses and diseases in general (housing, food, work conditions, domestic violence). This vulnerability is indeed the consequence of an economic and political system. All these issues are linked and make it even more necessary to refuse to blame the exploited and oppressed who are made responsible for having weaker vaccine protection than the dominant or wealthy classes. Today, if the demonstrations bring together many people hostile to the idea of being vaccinated, with attempts at hegemonization by antivax forces and the far right, they also

bring together layers, often militant, of people either already vaccinated or who will be vaccinated but who reject Macron's diktats and fight the government and its authoritarian policy.

It is indeed a question of public health, of protecting the entire population against this virus. It is a collective issue that concerns the whole of society, like the global issue of the fight against deadly epidemics. It was the discovery of vaccination by the English doctor Jenner at the end of the eighteenth century that made it possible to eradicate smallpox. Poliomyelitis, diphtheria, measles, tetanus and tuberculosis are no longer scourges thanks to vaccines. We have always spoken out in favour of health and prophylaxis policies organised to protect the population. Childhood vaccinations are part of these policies. We therefore do not share the antivax logic, we are fighting it and, on the contrary, we are in favour of the entire population of the planet having rapid and free access to the doses necessary to protect themselves, with, of course, public and transparent control of the products marketed. In the current state of available knowledge, covid vaccines represent a real massive efficacy and do not present any particular risks compared to other vaccines. Of course, we must not deny that there are possible mild or more serious side effects, but unrelated to the catastrophic figures announced on social networks by the antivax movement, which highlight these risks to refuse vaccines – and some of them are antivax in absolute terms. Identical polemics have existed and exist on all other vaccines, smallpox, hepatitis B, BCG, with vaccination campaigns that have encountered real problems, limited but real. As is the case with many drugs, medical procedures or hospitalization itself with nosocomial diseases. This reinforces the need to control and limit these side effects, a solid and well equipped public health system, a socialization of pharmaceutical trusts, a public pharmacovigilance independent of Big Pharma and so on. But this should not make us join the camp of vaccine sceptics.

Moreover, all the reports by epidemiologists warn (and already warned before 2020) that with the ease of international transport of humans and goods, the consequences of urbanization, deforestation and climate change, and the health and housing situation of the popular classes in many countries, we must expect further health disasters, including zoonoses, like that of Covid 19. So, we might as well try to be clear and consistent. In this, the fight against pandemics and the fight against climate change and the evils of capitalist globalisation are directly and sustainably linked.

The government's hypocrisy hides the need for a genuine public health policy, with the necessary resources, and for general vaccination by placing the responsibility for stopping the fourth wave on care workers and young people, and it is therefore conducting an "emergency" campaign, to bring down the curves, against these categories of the population. However, for months, the situation has been requiring, not police checks, threats of fines, wage suspensions and dismissals, but collective vaccination, in our country and throughout the world, with a public health campaign, especially among the most precarious: organizing tours of health and social service personnel in popular neighbourhoods and among the elderly to bring information and vaccines to those who have the least access to them, making use of the social security service (with the necessary staff and resources) and guaranteeing in a sustainable way a health system that protects the population from new epidemics, with beds and staff in hospitals and in all social protection services.

The question of collective vaccination immediately relates to evils generated or aggravated by the capitalist system: the deterioration of hospital coverage with the lack of beds and health personnel, the lack of social service staff in local authorities, the precarious situation of nursing homes, half of which are private, the retention of pharmaceutical production in the private sector. In departments such as Seine-Saint-Denis, the shortage of social services is evident in the absence of resources to give access to vaccination to vulnerable populations. Finally, the question of the practical and financial management of isolation is still open. The housing conditions for a large part of the families in the popular classes make any isolation at home inoperative and there is no overall financial coverage of the costs of hotels or dedicated residences.

Macron decreed compulsory vaccination for "certain" professions, stigmatizing "irresponsible" care workers and imposing the health pass for leisure (bars, restaurants, train/plane trips) and shopping centres, customers and

traders. Teachers, police officers, soldiers, SNCF agents and airlines (except hostesses and stewards) and postal workers are not yet affected by compulsory vaccination. Health unions have rightly protested against this stigma, a measure that came from a government that, a few months ago, forced health workers who tested positive but were asymptomatic to keep coming to work. Similarly, SUD Santé and the CGT, while refusing the stigmatization of care workers, are multiplying their demands for a public health policy, able to fight against this pandemic and other zoonoses to come!

Immediately and for the coming weeks, we must obviously move towards collective vaccination in France and ensure the lifting of patents, the production and free use of vaccines so that all regions of the world that do not have access to vaccines have them quickly. Sufficient staff, beds and services. A public health policy reversing all cuts made to health services by local authorities.

Fighting for collective vaccination against Covid, as a public health measure and not as “free individual choice” does not mean now imposing mandatory vaccination against Covid which, by taking a legal approach, would also take a penal and repressive reproach! We must therefore fight Macron's hypocritical compulsory vaccination, turning his back on a collective vaccination campaign.

We cannot escape the question of being for or against collective vaccination against Covid as a public health measure aimed at protecting the entire population. Similarly, that, in general, we cannot escape a position for or against childhood vaccinations as they exist today (even if we should be able to debate the usefulness of the famous 11 mandatory vaccinations), while understanding that vaccination against Covid will probably also become a global imperative in the coming years, this makes it even more necessary to make vaccines free of charge and patents to be lifted.

The hypocritical and restrictive method used to achieve vaccination (the compulsory pass) obviously leads to a great deal of anger never generated by other compulsory vaccinations. The shortage of hospitals, the opacity of controls on the large pharmaceutical industrial groups, the successive lies and negligence of the government, the frequent lies and the profit seeking of the pharmaceutical trusts, the autocratic and authoritarian methods of the government lead, for some, to a jumbled rejection of vaccination and the health pass, with widespread discontent and popular demonstrations reminiscent of the beginning of the mobilizations of the *Gilets jaunes*. However, they are essentially motivated by the obligation to introduce the health pass immediately and compulsory vaccination on pain of dismissal or suspension of pay. Supporting this movement must not prevent us from combating ambiguities or, worse still, the positions of the antivax movement on the very need for vaccination.

PS:

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