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2,000 dead as coronavirus ravages France - An overview (expanded version)

Saturday 28 March 2020, by [CHRETIEN Todd](#), [ROUSSET Pierre](#) (Date first published: 28 March 2020).

As of March 28, France ranks fifth in global Covid-19 deaths, with 1,995 deaths (365 [1] and 299 [2] on Thursday and Friday respectively) and approximately 33,000 dedected coronavirus infections. As the contagion rages out of control in neighboring Italy, Spain, and Germany, French health workers have battled to treat the sick and dying. Wednesday's death of a sixteen-year-old girl has only compounded the national tragedy [3]. President Emmanuel Macron has ordered series of belated emergency measures (yesterday calling in the military [4]), yet non-essential businesses continue to operate placing millions of workers at risk [5]. It is too early to tell when the Covid-19 peak will hit France and tens of thousands of lives are at risk in the coming weeks and months.

Compounding the health crisis in France, the coronavirus arrived in the midst of a massive battle over Macron's attempt raise the retirement age and impose neoliberal cuts on pensions. After large-scale strikes across France in the fall and winter, including the longest transportation strikes in the nation's history, Macron hopes to ram through his attacks under the cover of effective marshall law. [6] He may succeed in the short-term, but Macron will struggle to suppress the anger fueling recent strikes, a growing immigrant rights movement, and the long-running Yellow Vest protests as the coronavirus crisis drags on.

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Pierre Rousset is the founder of Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières [8], a bi-lingual website that produces and translates news and analysis with special emphasis on Europe, the Middle East, North and Sub-Saharan Africa, and Asia. Rousset joined the socialist movement in the early 1960s and organized against the US occupation of Vietnam. He was imprisoned three times in the wake of the 1968 general strike in France and has been an organizer in France's revolutionary socialist movement and the Fourth International since then. He is a member of the New Anticapitalist Party and writes on a wide range of topics, specializing in Asian politics and economics and global ecology, including contributing to *China's Rise: Strength and Fragility* [9]. Rousset answered questions from No Borders News as part of our ongoing international coronavirus coverage. The original French (updated and expanded) version is available at Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières [10].

No Borders News: Describe the state of the pandemic in your country or city. How many people are infected? How many have died? What do experts expect in the coming weeks in terms of how fast the contagion will spread.

Pierre Rousset: Comparing figures on the international level is very difficult. As of March 25 in France, there were 25,000 “confirmed” cases, but only those presenting serious symptoms are tested here whereas testing is widespread in other countries. The government announced 1,331 deaths, but these are only deaths recorded in hospitals. The government still does not know the number who have died in retirement homes (EPHAD) or in their own homes. Official figures state that 11,539 people were hospitalized for coronavirus, of which 2,827 were in serious condition (3,900 were discharged after recovering).

It is very difficult to estimate the number people who have been infected. The Ministry of Health spoke of a range between 35,000 and 80,000, most likely a significant underestimation. The former Director of Public Health (our Surgeon General) suggested, with all due caution, a figure of 2 million.

NBN: What practical measures has your national government taken to respond to the crisis? Have they acted responsibly or were they unprepared? Briefly describe measures your government is taking now to contain the virus and treat people infected with Covid-19. Is there a state of emergency, are schools closed, etc.?

PR: The country was totally unprepared for the pandemic although the president and the government have known since January that the epidemic would soon arrive. This lack of preparation stems from several sources. Some are old, some are new.

Genuine readiness would have meant maintaining strategic stocks of protective gear, detection tests, hydroalcoholic gel, intubation equipment, etc. And here we are referring to a specifically French tragedy because these strategic stocks once existed but they were destroyed. Regarding masks, in 2009 there were nearly a billion surgical masks (worn by patients to protect those around them) and 700 million FFP2 (N95) respiratory masks which protect healthy people from contamination. These state-managed stocks were distributed in 2013 to hospitals and businesses that were told to maintain them at their own expense without any financial support to do so. By January, there was no longer a single FFP2 (N95) mask in government stocks and only 130,000 million surgical masks. The result is that today, when we are weeks into the crisis, a large number of caregivers - particularly those directly exposed to contamination - do not have the masks they need, and pharmacies are not able to give them to people at risk because of their age or the state of their health.

Certain regions are suffering an extreme health emergency. For instance, in the Grand Est region, an evangelical religious sect brought together thousands of people for several days, leading to an explosion of Covid-19 in that region while contributing to the virus' dissemination in metropolitan France and to overseas territories. This was particularly irresponsible given the South Korean precedent (another evangelical sect meeting in Wuhan, China during the explosion of the epidemic returned secretly to Korea giving rise to an massive contagion).

President Emmanuel Macron's watchword has been to save money, that is, cut the budget everywhere and all the time over the last three years, cuts for which we are paying dearly today. The

state must step aside, says Macron, so the “necessarily more efficient” market can take charge; hence, medical supply production was outsourced to China. As the health crisis ramped up, we found that everything was lacking and the industrial fabric capable of providing what we urgently needed had disintegrated.

The government had not grasped the depth of the problem until recently. Without stating it explicitly, Macron at first shaped his policy according to the concept of group immunity because, as one of his advisers admitted, they thought it was “a big flu”. In January, the question arose of whether or not to proceed with municipal elections set for March 15. In fact, the government decided to hold the vote and thousands of liters of hydroalcoholic gel were wasted on this occasion by poll workers and voters, even though it is still difficult to find sanitizer in pharmacies. Further, the government’s decision to hold the March 15 vote convinced the population that the situation was not very serious.

Then, starting in mid-March, Macron adopted increasingly severe measures: closure of elementary schools, high schools, and universities, calls to respect gestes barriers(physical and social distancing) and to limit movement under penalty of fines, decrees extending over the whole territory and no longer just in a few areas, etc.

NBN: How has your health care system responded to the crisis? What are your health care system’s greatest weaknesses? What are its greatest strengths?

PR: The social safety net in France was one of the most developed in the Western world based on, in particular, reforms won by the labor movement in the aftermath of the Second World War. The founding principle of French social security is: “everyone contributes according to their means and is treated according to their needs.” Health care equality was never perfect, but it was a major achievement. An achievement undermined over many years by giving private insurance an ever increasing role, gradually making the cost of health a very heavy burden for the working classes. However, in France, a large portion of hospital care remains free for everyone.

The French health model has never been perfect, far from it, but the hospital system was one of the strongest in the world. Yet, for 30 years it has suffered continuous attacks in the name of accounting rigor, as if a hospital should be managed like a business! More than 50,000 beds have been eliminated, including in intensive care units where France ranks only nineteenth globally in the number of beds per inhabitant – France has 3.1 beds per person compared to Japan’s 7.8.

Thus far, the hospital system has been able to cope with the rapidly increasing number of patients requiring intensive care, but it may be overwhelmed within a week or two. At that point, it will no longer be able to treat everyone.

In itself, Covid-19 is not a particularly deadly disease, the vast majority of cases are mild. If the health system (from general practitioners to hospitals) were prepared to cope with a pandemic, if detection tests and masks were available in large numbers, vulnerable people could be taken care of under proper conditions. On the other hand, Covid-19’s threat is multiplied in a situation of shortage. There will be many preventable deaths, victims of the coronavirus, or other conditions that will not be properly treated because of the strain on the system. We are only at the beginning of this ordeal.

NBN: Describe the official political response to Covid-19 in your country from the far-right and conservative parties, to liberal and social democrat parties, and the parties of the left if applicable.

PR: Given the situation, all political forces, including the far left, are demanding that everyone respect protective measures, from social distancing to confinement.

In order to silence its critics, the government and the president's party are appealing for national unity, denouncing any criticism in these times of emergency, all with the support of mainstream conservatives, the extreme right, the center-left parties of government, and the employers.

The radical left rejects this logic because it ends up endowing the presidency with extraordinary powers to suppress civil liberties. For example, the government has set aside provisions in the Labor Code by raising, among other things, limits on the work week to 60 hours as opposed to the previous limit of 48 hours. This is true even as employees are generally not guaranteed healthy and safe working conditions that guard against the spread of coronavirus. The "go to work" compulsion overrides the call to "stay confined."

Companies are legally required to ensure the safety of their employees, but we know this is never the case even in normal times because employees are unable to enforce workplace compliance with regulations. The government had recently presented employers with a gift by reducing the powers of the Health, Safety and Working Conditions Committee (CHSCT). In one sign of employer-friendly actions by the government prior to the crisis, the authorities "informed" businesses that surgical masks (which are less expensive) protected workers just as effectively as respiratory masks FFP2 (which are more expensive), this is patently false. When Macron says "work more," he is cynically contradicting the official doctrine of staying at home and this will only increase circulation of the virus owing to the lack of health protections.

NBN: How have trade unions responded to the crisis? Especially public sector, education, and health care unions?

PR: To quote the terms of a union press release dated March 19, "Faced with this major health crisis," the trade union confederations (CFDT, CGT, FO, CFE-CGC, CFTC) and employers' organizations (MEDEF, CPME, U2P) affirmed, in a joint declaration, "the essential role of social dialogue and collective bargaining." [11]

So far, this has been the only important common "action" carried out by the workers' confederations. This statement caused a great deal of commotion amongst workers in a number of unions, notably the CGT, traditionally led by the Communist Party. In several cities and departments, the unions have published joint declarations for the protection of employees and the full payment of wages for part-time work stemming from reduced hours.

Meanwhile, the question of the struggle is being raised in local workplaces where workers are demanding the effective closure of non-essential activities, safety standards commensurate with health risks, and the extension of social welfare for all. For instance, Renault and Amazon employees walked out to shut down business and demand real protections.

NBN: How have social movements (student, feminist, ecological, immigrant, indigenous, etc.) responded to the crisis?

PR: Each social movement has mobilized on its own terrain - for the defense of immigrants or the homeless, to demand abortions are recognized as medical emergencies and not postponed indefinitely (which has been won) - and each specific movement has affirmed its solidarity with others.

Women appear to suffer somewhat lower medical risks from Covid-19 compared to men, however,

they are more socially vulnerable because of the still unequal distribution of household chores and because the professions most directly exposed to coronavirus are predominantly female: healthworkers (obviously) but also cashiers in department and grocery stores, etc.

Therefore, the social movements are demonstrating particular solidarity with women. Lockdown considerably increases the risk of conjugal and domestic violence and makes the indispensable solidarity with battered women much more difficult to put in place. [12]

Neighbors are offering solidarity with each other in their own apartment buildings and every evening at 8 p.m. people cheer from their windows to show support for our healthworkers.

In terms of local solidarity, we face a particular difficulty in France. The traditions of local "citizen" mobilization are much weaker with us than in countries like Italy. Unions are not used to acting outside the workplace, local unions have generally never been valued (compared to the national federations), nor have they received significant funding. We must organize local solidarity "from below," but it's difficult to start doing so under confinement!

Some social movements (not all...) are also preparing for what comes next by linking emergency programs to perspectives: ecological revolution, complete reform of health policy and social protection, nationalization and socialization of vital sectors (including finance), etc. The hope is that the ordeal we are all going through today is not in vain, but will act as a springboard for the struggles of tomorrow!

NBN: Are there any efforts to make demands for social justice, national health care, emergency economic measures for unemployment pay, stopping rent and debt payments, etc.?

PR: Rightly, all these efforts should be part of the nation's first response.

The authorities know this and are trying to respond rhetorically, without changing any of their priorities. Thus, Macron declared that limitless funds will be available to face the crisis, to guarantee the maintenance of wages and incomes, and, in particular, to provide workers with 84 percent of their net salary in the event of reduced employment, including 100 percent of salaries for those who earn the minimum wage. Also, the European Union has itself suspended (self-imposed) balanced-budget rules imposed on member states.

However, when any member of the government attempts to intervene, a cacophony arises. Who is really empowered to do what? When, in fact, administrative and departmental authorities (such as social security administrators or regional secretaries, etc.) accept or reject social welfare measures in response to the crisis, what will ultimately remain of presidential promises?

The government is ostensibly acting through the banks (the state endowed them with 300 billion euros) and big businesses are postponing layoffs so that they do not lose their skilled workforce. Thus, managing the economy is central to the logic of power, much more so than guaranteeing social and civil rights, and this fact has far-reaching implications.

Finally, Macron took advantage of the crisis to present himself as a warlord and to praise the role of the French military in mainland France as well as in the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. He sees the crisis as an opportunity to continue his militarist policies. [13]

NBN: How will the Covid-19 crisis impact national politics in the coming weeks and months?

PR: The health crisis reveals the weakness of France's industrial fabric and the absence of a clear industrial policy. [14] This is doubly damaging. The French pharmaceutical industry bosses are powerful, but production is outsourced overseas.

Historically, the French bourgeoisie had a very strong leadership tradition. Under the classic Gaullist regime, the state was intended to drive economic development in coordination with the private sector and, on occasion, even with the army (energy and arms sectors, civilian and military nuclear, etc.). We even had five-year plans, although they were certainly different from the Soviet plans.

Compared to others, the French bourgeoisie did not convert itself to neoliberal dictates until relatively late, but when it did, the bosses and the state made a radical turn, which explains the extent and speed of deindustrialization.

Thus, faced with the coronavirus, Asian countries like South Korea and Japan look on our desperate lack of means with dismay. We are utterly dependent on international markets to obtain simple masks! How can the fifth or sixth most powerful economy in the world be so destitute?

The European Union's helplessness in times of crisis is also glaring. It has been unable to act in solidarity with Italy, which has been hit hard and has no mask production at all on its own soil. Aid arrived from China, Russia, Cuba, but not from the European Union. Health policies are not part of the prerogatives of the EU. This is pathetic and this failure will not be without consequences.

The Covid-19 epidemic is a concentration of several crises. The global model of capitalist development will now face sharper questions than ever before. The power of the current pandemic was born and bred by globalization, social insecurity, the disintegration of public powers and policies, ecological crisis, and the neoliberal order.

And, there is no longer any room for doubt that the eco-socialist alternative is *truly* a vital necessity.

P.S.

- NO BORDERS ON MARCH 28, 2020:
<https://nobordersnews.org/2020/03/28/pierre-rousset-2000-dead-as-coronavirus-ravages-france/>

This version has been slightly expanded by International Viewpoint following the French version published on [ESSF](#) which also contains more references. }

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2020/mar/27/coronavirus-live-news-update-us-infections-outnumber-china-uk-deaths-europe-global-cases-number-500000-latest-updates?page=with:block-5e7e485c8f08af215f6fcbc2#block-5e7e485c8f08af215f6fcbc2>

[2] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2020/mar/27/coronavirus-live-news-update-us-infections-outnumber-china-uk-deaths-europe-global-cases-number-500000-latest-updates?page=with:block-5e7e485c8f08af215f6fcbc2#block-5e7e485c8f08af215f6fcbc2>

[3] <https://www.france24.com/en/20200327-she-just-had-a-cough-teen-s-covid-19-death-shakes-france>

[4] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2020/mar/26/emmanuel-macron-drafts-french-military-into-coronavirus-war-video>

[5] ESSF (article 52640), [Covid-19 and workers' struggles: Right to strike "confined" in France](#).

[6] ESSF (article 51903), [France: The mobilization in defense of the pensions is continuing, so is Macron's isolation](#)

ESSF (article 52206), [France, social mobilizations: Opposition to pensions counter-reform weakens Macron](#).

[7] ESSF (article 52641), [France: Macron forces through pension reform, step up the mobilization!](#).

[8] <http://www.europe-solidaire.org>

[9] <https://www.amazon.com/Chinas-Rise-Strength-Fragility-Notebooks/dp/0850366372>

[10] <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article52622>

[11] See *Déclaration commune*.

[12] The government has introduced a system of alerts for women through the pharmacies which remain open. *Le Monde*, 28 March 2020 "[Confinement : les violences conjugales en hausse, un dispositif d'alerte mis en place dans les pharmacies](#)".

[13] AP News, 3 December 2019 "[The Latest: Macron wants bigger Europe military role in NATO](#)".

[14] *Atlantico*, 18 March 2020 "[Pénurie de respirateurs et de masques : est-il vraiment si difficile de mettre en œuvre une politique industrielle en soutien de notre santé ? Partie I](#)", and 21 March 2020 "[Pénurie de respirateurs, de masques et de tests : suite](#)".