

Emmanuel Macron's Weak Pandemic Response Is a Bad Omen for His Promises on Climate Action

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Like the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change is a threat to all humanity. But it's working-class people who are suffering most — and faced with both crises, Emmanuel Macron's government is not taking concrete action to help.

France is one of the countries worst affected by the coronavirus pandemic — with more than 130,000 cases and 24,000 deaths at the time of writing. The gilets jaunes protesters' slogan comparing the struggle over “the end of the month” to the struggle over the “end of the world” today sounds like a haunting prophecy.

The strict quarantine to slow the spread of the virus is rubbing salt into the wounds of a France that has recently experienced an exceptionally long period of social unrest. From the start of the gilets jaunes uprising almost a year and a half ago to the mass movement against a proposed pension reform, France's streets have seen huge mobilizations, with the question of climate change and solidarity at the core of those popular movements.

The parallels that can already be drawn between the coronavirus pandemic and the climate crisis will be crucial for approaching climate politics going forward. Central to this comparison are the blatant inequalities in terms of who is most affected and the call for broad restructuring of economies and societies. Moreover, in this comparison, we can find the material bases for reimagining political responses to both COVID-19 and the climate crisis.

Macron 2.0?

After adopting a warmonger's attitude in calling for the nation to fight this invisible enemy, President Emmanuel Macron has recently changed his tone. He's no longer the [commander in chief assembling his troops](#) and preparing the nation for sacrifice. He has rather become a caring figure, concerned about the pain and sacrifice that his people are enduring, worried about the rising inequalities that the COVID-19 crisis feeds.

In a recent interview with [the Financial Times](#), the former investment banker declared himself open to changes and ready to put in place unorthodox social and economic measures at the national and European level. When asked by the journalist about the relationship between this crisis and climate change, the French president asserted that it would serve as a “wake up call” and exhorted “developed countries to take action right now before it is too late.” These words, which could have come from Greta Thunberg, have left observers with a lot of questions.

One concrete question that quickly comes to mind: What could the climate action plan for the rest of Macron's term look like — and how different could it be from the current one?

Past Visions of a “Green” Macron

Although it might not directly answer the question, it is enlightening to analyze this sudden change of heart in the light of two and half years of Macron’s leadership. It seems reasonable to believe that Emmanuel Macron had planned to focus the last portion of his five-year term on climate and environmental concerns, in what can be understood as the third step in his reelection strategy:

1. Accelerate the process of desegregating the rigidity of the French social system and labor law. Liberalize the economy and ensure that social security is reduced to a safety net while creating an economic environment favorable to investors, in what the economic orthodoxy would call a “modernization” effort.
2. Construct an image of himself as a European leader and visionary, profiting from the unwillingness of Angela Merkel and Germany to take up this role.
3. Turn to issues of environment and climate change to consolidate the “progressive” and even planetary aspects of this visionary profile, thus ensuring he would be viewed as responsive to the “progressive” wing of his electoral coalition.

If this last point was likely already part of Macron’s initial strategy, the resignation of popular former environment minister Nicolas Hulot [weakened his credibility](#) on this matter. Hulot’s decision was triggered by the administration’s lack of real climate ambitions and seeming proximity to industry and fossil fuel lobbies.

Two months later, in October 2018, the gilets jaunes uprising started, ignited by a proposed tax on diesel — a measure that exacerbated social inequalities and was broadly understood as an example of unfair and unsustainable climate action. Macron’s unwillingness to even compromise, let alone sacrifice, any major economic interest at the altar of climate change, was made clear to all upon the ratification of the free trade agreement CETA (Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement) in July 2019, in spite of strong parliamentary and popular opposition.

A Great Debate?

Macron’s approach to the climate question has been evolving ever since. It was certainly influenced by the performance of the French Europe Ecology Greens (EELV) at the 2019 European elections, where they secured almost 13 percent of the vote and became the third party nationally behind Marine Le Pen’s far-right Rassemblement National and Macron’s La République en Marche. The fact that this “green wave” was felt across Europe and particularly in Germany was another factor pushing Macron to revise his strategy.

Before the start of the pandemic, Macron’s response to the electoral need to deal with the climate question relied on getting results from the “Citizens’ Convention for Climate.” This convention was set up as one of the outcomes of the “Great Debate,” a three-month national consultation with citizens’ assemblies across the country in which Macron personally participated. During a series of televised “shows,” he displayed his concerns for everyday people’s problems, often with a paternalistic tone, alternately reassuring and chiding his fellow citizens about what was possible and what was not.

This living exercise in public consultation (a term familiar to anyone who has ever wandered into the world of the European Commission) was designed to respond to demands for direct citizen involvement in political decisions, made clear during the gilets jaunes protests. The Citizens’ Convention for Climate comprised 150 members drawn by lot and given the task to discuss and propose a set of measures that would reduce national carbon emissions by 40 percent before 2040.

This April 11 the convention — brought together via video conference — produced a list of fifty proposals to the government. While this list has not yet been made public, enough of the text has been leaked to reveal that, particularly in light of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, the [proposals are already outdated](#). Some of the proposals do go in the right direction — “building renovations, limitation of urban expansion, support for biking options in urban and rural areas, etc.” — but as a whole, they are tainted with the sort of “sustainable development thinking” dear to the United Nations and other international institutions. This approach was already clearly insufficient before the current crisis, and the convention’s proposals are now that much further from responding to the clarion call for massive social change brought forward by the pandemic.

Upon analyzing the crisis and its possible consequences, it seems that perceptions of risk, collective danger, and preparedness will remain unsettled among the general public, at least for a while. For people in power, giving the impression that everything will be done in the same way, and at the same scale, that it was before could prove a poor strategy, risking them to be perceived as out of touch. And this seems to be something that Macron has acknowledged and understood. This is why he has declared himself opening the door to “outside the box” thinking, claiming that he “feels the profound need to reinvent something new.”

Radical Change Needed

And indeed, the COVID-19 crisis is providing valuable hints regarding the climate breakdown and the way it should be approached by policymakers and politicians.

Both phenomena are external physical crises concretely impacting physical bodies — including through the direct threat of death — as distinct from the [more abstract elements of the financial crisis](#), for instance. And during this crisis, we have seen that drastic measures taken early, including mass testing, quarantine, and social distancing, have proven effective in different countries and contexts.

The importance of urgency illustrates what climate activists and the scientific community have been saying: that swift and radical climate action will not only preserve us from future catastrophes but will also reorganize the way we currently approach issues such as production and the extraction of raw materials. The climate crisis is ongoing, and we have enough scientific evidence to measure it. Any avoidance or delay to the needed measures must now be judged in light of the current health crisis.

If Macron is sincere about the need for change, we must ask if this will translate into a moratorium on investment by French companies in fossil fuels, particularly those gas-related investments [responsible for half the increase](#) in CO₂ emissions since 2012. In a time when the price of oil has dramatically plummeted — reaching even the nonsensical depths of negative value — will there be a redefinition of the fossil-fuel sector, organized by the state and involving concrete support for workers?

Bailing out the fossil fuel or aviation industries without restructuring them, reskilling their workers, and reframing their management would represent a total denial of the climate emergency — and, indeed, of the essence of what it is to “govern” the crisis.

For the Front Lines

The pandemic, like the climate crisis, is another important indicator of the structural injustices created by our capitalist economic structure, as well as our imperialist and colonial history. It reveals a situation in which the “front-line communities,” i.e., the people most affected by the crisis,

are the same socioeconomic groups already facing discrimination on economic, gender, and racial premises.

Seine-Saint-Denis, the poorest département in mainland France, [registers especially high numbers of people](#) hit by and dying because of COVID-19. This is also a département mainly inhabited by ethnic minorities from former French colonies. The reason for this specific vulnerability lies at the intersection of precarity, lack of decent housing services, and a reduced number of hospitals and doctors. The high rate of employment in the building and care sectors — the latter very often occupied by women — is another factor that explains the toll being taken on this segregated community.

When surveying this situation, it is impossible not to think of all the front-line communities in the Global South losing their homes and habitat to the rising seas — or enduring the devastating effects of the increased occurrence of climate events like typhoons and floods.

What the pandemic confirms is that the scars of exploitation and injustice become all the more visible in periods of intense crisis. The social and ecological transformation needed in the post-COVID-19 era must confront the massive pauperization of working people organized by the neoliberal order. The French case suggests that any further dismissal of this necessity will increase the social and political decomposition already taking place in many European societies.

New Alliances

Even if Macron forgets his pledge for change made to *Financial Times* readers, he can still rely on civil society and social movements to remind him of the need to radically change his approach to climate policies.

In an open letter published on March 27, the slogan “Plus jamais ça!” (“Never again!”), eighteen representatives of leading trade unions and other social organizations called for a clear and definite change to Macron’s neoliberal policies, demanding a strong response to the crisis, including an [immediate halt to all layoffs, a rent freeze, and the requisition of unoccupied houses to shelter homeless people](#).

The open letter also dives into what should be done after the first aid package is distributed and the time comes for economic reconstruction. And here again, the message is clear: the road to follow is one that links the ecological transformation of the economy with the redistribution of wealth, alongside the rebirth of the necessary public services to sustain this transformation. The question of food systems is also addressed, with signatories demanding the reorganization and re-localization of agricultural systems.

If the term “Green New Deal” (GND) is not mentioned in the open letter, the general claim and demands are in line with what has been heard on the other side of the Atlantic, particularly in the GND proposals made by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Bernie Sanders. The notion that brave climate policy must be intrinsically linked to the reorganization of our social and economic structures seems increasingly to take root organically among different progressive actors and civil society across societies.

The question that remains is what those new coalitions should do if Macron’s resolutions disappear as fast as they first emerged — as suggested by France’s [decision not to review](#) its carbon emissions for the 2019-2023 period.

The answer may lie in the new alliances emerging, the bridges being built, and the clear need to learn from health care and other workers who have held society on their shoulders — and who will

soon demand justice and recognition for their work. Decisive, here, is that the climate movement, in alliance with other social forces, can help to bring the demands of front-line communities in France, Europe, and the Global South to the forefront of the coming struggles. Then “Plus jamais ça!” can become an assertion of intent and not just a hope.

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