France: Down with the disease of capitalism!

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?We are at war. The whole action of the government and of Parliament should now be turned towards the combat against the epidemic. [?] We are at war. The Nation will support her sons and daughters who, as medical professionals in cities and in the hospitals, are on the front line. We owe them the means and protection.?

With martial tones, vaguely echoing the reactionary PM Clémenceau during WWI, President Macron appealed to the French Nation on several occasions in the last ten days, announcing the special restrictions on movement to stop the epidemic. However, despite their gravity, his words can barely hide a reality that is quite different from his narrative.

First, the war metaphor is of course a pure fiction of propaganda. No, it is not a war. It is the pandemic that WHO and other specialists have been warning the world?s governments of for decades. What have they done to prepare for it? Worse than nothing.

For months, the government denied the gravity of the disease. Until late February, most people believed the media and thought it was little more than a kind of flu. As if to emphasise the point, the government insisted on organising the first round of local elections on March 15. This was despite mounting evidence and recommendations that it was totally insane to do so, as it would dramatically increase the spread of the virus.

Further evidence is the sheer lack of protective masks in France. In 2011, there were still about one billion masks in stock. Then the government decided that it was too expensive to keep this stock, allegedly passing the responsibility to local organisations. As a result, the stock vanished and today even medical doctors have to go to the ?front line? without protection, not to mention workers in the shops, in the transport sector etc. All of this was hidden by a smoke screen of propaganda, claiming that masks were not really that useful and that just washing hands was enough. Today, however, the French government is frantically trying to buy about 100 million masks from China, which will be barely enough for one month.

The same can be said for the virus tests. While the WHO recommends to test, test and test, the French system is completely overwhelmed and is only capable of about 2000 tests per day, while Germany can do several times more and South Korea has already tested a good fraction of the population.

Of course, the doctors and the nurses are outraged because this is just another sign of the dire consequences for the public health of the neoliberal politics applied to this sector for decades, by right wing and left wing governments.

The number of hospitals beds, that now appear so precious, went from 612,898 to 428,987 between 1982 and 2013, a 30 percent decrease, as a consequence of a series of reforms, that restructured the whole sector, dictated by nothing but the will to reduce the state budget. In Paris and in all the regions, hospitals
were closed because they were deemed ?not profitable?. Where they did remain open, this was often only as a result of long struggles by the workers and local populations.

For more than one year, A&E personnel have been taking strike action, demanding the hiring of more nurses and doctors and wage increases. Indeed, with every flu epidemic, the hospitals are overwhelmed. As a result, the French system is now facing the pandemic, that has hit the east of the country and the Paris region particularly severely, without the necessary protective equipment, disarmed and weakened by the government itself.

The public medical research sector has denounced the lack of funding for research into this specific kind of virus. The private sector has never considered it an attractive option, probably because for a long time such diseases were hitting the semi-colonial world, hardly worth the effort for the masters of pharmaceutical corporations. Around 2000, especially with the arrival of SARS, some research was started in the public sector on treatments and vaccination. However, after the epidemic subsided, all this was stopped due to lack of funds and interest from medical authorities. As SARS is similar to the corona virus, precious years were lost to prepare for this new epidemic.

Of course, the war rhetoric used by the government is really only intended to silence any dissenting voices. Or, as Macron puts it, ?When you commit to a war, you commit wholly, you have to mobilise in unity?. Ominously, one of the first actions of this ?war? was a spate of 25 decrees deregulating workers? rights: the working day was increased to 12 hours (from 10), the working week can go up to 60 hours (from 48), rest time is reduced to 9 hours (versus 11 today), and all this until December 2020. The clear intention is to super-exploit workers at the end of the ?lockdown? period so that the bosses can get back some of their profits. Indeed, the massive refinancing packages promised by the government to the bosses, and the programme of nationalisations, will come at an enormous cost for the working class. As in 2008, they will bear the brunt of a massive increase in state debt and cuts to the welfare system and working rights.

Initiated by the radical left (NPA, SUD), an interesting appeal analyses the situation and criticises the government. It contains a series of demands that we can fully support including:

- the immediate stoppage of all companies not essential to the functioning of society
- a massive and immediate injection of funds for the health system
- nationalisation of the pharmaceutical industry
- immediate and large scale opening of accommodation for the homeless and the ?sans-papier?, those without official documentation
- closure of administrative retention centres
- liberation of a maximum of detainees from the overcrowded prisons

However, this appeal closes on a utopian note. ?Sharing of the wealth against Covid-19. The time of Covid should not be a time of fear, exclusion and a repressive State. It should be on the contrary a time of solidarity, organisation of the society itself, to impose and realise our own solidarity. We should be the bearer of demands, initiatives for the control and the reorganisation of society, for the sanitary and social urgency.?

Against all this, capitalism and its state has declared war and it will be capable of the most vicious resistance. The working class should not dream of a peaceful process but prepare its weapons of class struggle and be ready for the most serious measures, including the general strike, revolt and seizure of power to defend its conquests and impose its own reorganisation of society.