

# What's Happening in France?

August 14, 2021



A protester holds a sign reading “No to health pass” during a demonstration called by the “Yellow Vest Movement” (gilets jaunes) against France’s restrictions, including a compulsory health pass, to fight the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak, in Paris, France, July 31, 2021. REUTERS/Sarah Meyssonnier

*Aplusoc is the abbreviation for the collective Arguments for the Social Struggle.*

[July 29, 2021] Seen from abroad, through the press but also, unfortunately, through certain leftist interpretations, France is in a very strange situation. It has experienced the biggest “anti-vaccination movement” in the world, that is, after the United States under the inspiration of Trump and Brazil under the inspiration of Bolsonaro. A reactionary movement, therefore, but massive, showing that the “fascization of society” fantasized by some and contradicted by the vote in the regional elections at the end of June in France, would unfortunately be very real.

This frightening vision must be denied. France is no more in the grip of a Trumpon-Bolsonarian anti-vaccine wave, than the Arab and North African peoples are Islamists, or the Ukrainians are anti-Semitic “Nazis.”

It’s Macron, first of all, who in terms of the pandemic has much more in common with Trump and Bolsonaro. In the spring of 2020, he said not to put on masks. The French government like many others initially did not want to see the epidemic coming; then it precipitated a total containment enforced by the police, banning masks but not testing the population, which interrupted a wave of

strikes in defense of the right to retirement, a project which was then suspended. In the spring of 2021 he effectively curbed vaccination, only opening it to the mass of the population in June and refusing to organize it towards teaching staff. At that time, the 4th wave of the "Delta" variant, which has claimed millions of lives in India, was already foreseeable.

On the other hand, the uniqueness of the presidential elections next year in the history of the Fifth Republic is essential to understand what is going on. On the side of the left, environmentalists and the workers' movement, no candidate will be able to succeed the first round, not because there would be no social revolt in France and not because there would be no aspiration for a society liberated from capital and oppression, quite the contrary, but because no confidence exists any longer in this kind of candidates.

But at the same time Macron failed. He had to beat the working class by destroying existing social rights, and although he did harm, he failed. He hoped to restore the Fifth Republic regime with an all-powerful, quasi-imperial presidential office - that he called "Jupiter" - and he failed either. He also wished to restore French imperialist power in the European Union and in Africa: total failure.

The "normal" functioning of French institutions would lead the president to be re-elected for a second term, and Macron would, of course, hope to restore this normal functioning. Majority abstention, the electoral defeat of the presidential party (which, in fact, is not even a party), and the failure of Marine Le Pen's RN, have shown that the presidential elections are under threat. Macron risk, if he is a candidate, being defeated in the first round, and the very real and very concrete possibility of a majority abstention risks making these elections the opposite of what they should be for the Fifth Republic: a plebiscite which revives it, investing a president leading the anti-social attacks.

It is a major crisis of the regime that is looming, and that is why Aplusoc has debated the political option of campaigning for a rejection of the presidential elections, a majority abstention, as a prospect for the proletariat, opening the way to confrontation. Because this clash, under Macron, has already erupted on a pre-revolutionary scale twice: with the movement of the Yellow Vests at the end of 2018, and with the push towards a general strike in defense of the right to retirement at the end of 2019. That's why Macron failed. And that is why he wants to counter-attack before the presidential election, with an anti-social victory that allows this vote, an undemocratic plebiscite, to play its role. He wants to save the regime of the Fifth Republic. Incidentally (even if it is perhaps the most important for him), he wants to make his own candidacy credible for his successor, because it is not.

At the beginning of July, the French media were therefore buzzing with rumors about a draft "big speech" by the president, prepared by the fact that he called the unions to a meeting on July 6 (and their leaders came ...), supposedly a great speech which was undoubtedly to announce the raising of the retirement age from 62 to 64 years. At the same time, the "Delta variant" was coming at full speed and the risk grew that Macron would shoot himself in the foot by announcing anti-social attacks as the epidemic returned.

He therefore decided in his grand speech on July 12 to announce a combination of anti-social attacks and anti-epidemic measures. Using the mass immunization's own delays due to his policies and using the anti-vaccine obscurantist currents as a very useful foil, he set in motion a sort of plan of attack with the following timetable.

- First, implementation at the end of July early August of the "health pass" prohibiting access without completed vaccination or paid test (from September 1) to a very large number of means of transport and public services, even hospital outside emergencies, as well as to cafes,

restaurants, cultural and sporting venues, and the outbreak of controversies “for” or “against” vaccination intended to disturb opposition to these measures.

- Second, as of September 15, health workers, transport workers, firefighters, staff in hotels, cafes, restaurants, and leisure parks, who have not yet been vaccinated, will be without salaries at least until 15 November, and risk dismissal.
- Third, on October 1, application of the unemployment insurance reform, then other anti-social pension reforms, etc.

This calendar was put in place by Macron after the union leaders-Inter-union CGT / FO / FSU / SUD Solidaire-had given their own calendar just before going on vacation: ... to begin on August 30 a campaign to launch a major National Day of Action... on October 5!

It is also important to know what the real government goals for immunization are. Prime Minister J. Castex announced them on July 21. At the beginning of September, there should theoretically be 50 million people in France who have received at least one injection, including 35 millions having received two, so 15 millions with only one. Out of 57 million inhabitants over 12 years old, this means that at least 22 million people (the 15 million with a single dose and the 7 million without any), are “programed” by the government in such a way that they cannot, in fact, be vaccinated in September. They will have to undergo the prohibitions due to the prohibitions of the “vaccine pass.” As many are young people (almost none were vaccinated at the end of June, since until then priority was given to the elderly), they have already suffered the deprivation of large-scale studies and the reforms of the government on high school, because of the risk of explosion at the start of the school year the obligation of the “health pass” has been postponed to October 1 for those under 18.

There is a scandalous falsification to make people believe that the unvaccinated in France are mostly opponents of vaccination. As the government’s forecasts show, it does not seek to vaccinate the entire population but is content to stigmatize the unvaccinated who are mostly workers and precarious employees, those living in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods, and the youth, who are targeted. In the “overseas departments” (former colonies), this is the situation for most of the population.

It is appalling that labor activists do not realize this situation and lecture these people by telling them, “You just have to get vaccinated.” The waiting time for getting vaccinated is now several weeks.

Admittedly, opposition to vaccination, scientifically unjustified, is in these circumstances quite widespread among the population. It has three types of causes.

First, conspiracy rumors. The Qanon-style nonsense exists in France, and they are enhanced by the fact that Macron and the media designate them as the only opposition. Fighting these currents is mandatory, but if you do not start by denouncing Macron’s measures, the constraints linked to the health pass and the threats against unvaccinated employees, you are playing their game.

The second type of cause can be found among the many young and old alike who have legitimate questions. How could it be otherwise, given the health scandals that have already taken place, given the living conditions in an age of global warming, precariousness, and deadly capitalism? The government announces a decree, which has not been published, about patients for whom vaccination is medically prohibited: for the moment, there is no plan for their situation! Rational worker activists, if they are really rational, and not morality fathers contemptuous of the youth and the broader masses, must respect these reservations and discuss them without threats or accusations, and above all without supporting more or less Macron’s so-called health policy.

Third type of cause is this. The number of vaccinations is increasing sharply, and this is a good thing, but Macron's measures themselves revolt people to the point that some who wanted to be vaccinated no longer want to.

These three types of causes are grouped together in particular in the poorest paid and most female categories of nursing staffs. Whether we like it or not, there are tens of thousands, women especially who are heading towards confrontation in the form of their suspension or their dismissal from September 15, with a kind of sacrificial will. Impressive.

If you tell them all they have to do is get the shot, including to outsmart Macron, you won't convince them. Because to the three reasons given, the "bad" (conspiratorial propaganda), and the "good" (legitimate questions and feeling of revolt), there is added here a fourth: scorned dignity.

A caregiver who worked 70 hours a week in the middle of the first confinement, who sometimes had Covid and who was forced to work, who has her hands chapped by liquid gel and who has been wearing her mask all day long since soon two-year-old, who had not had time to be vaccinated, or who has questions to which she has found no other "answer" on the net than antiscientific theories on messenger RNA, is not now in a situation of going to be vaccinated (especially when her colleague, in solidarity with her now, who was vaccinated, had a salary withdrawal because it made her sick!), is now in a state of revolt. Fortunately, more and more union sections are filing strike notices so as not to leave them alone.

Of course, automatic vaccination of everyone is desirable. But it must be understood that capitalism, the pharmaceutical trusts, and the policies of the Macron governments have created a situation where certain layers of the proletariat can only be vaccinated by force. To make these proletarians morally responsible is to reject them and thrust them towards obscurantism, and it is to manifest elitist prejudices towards the most exploited layers - something very striking during the present weeks in France, in certain left and activist circles.

It is by no means Macron who will regain the confidence that everyone should be vaccinated, such is not his intention. The suspensions on September 15 are not aimed at the health security of hospitals and retirement homes where these staff worked throughout the epidemic, a large majority of staff and residents being vaccinated. They aim to undermine labor law and the status of civil servants. Any support, any passivity, on this threat, is support for Macron and the breaking of our rights and will have no health effects.

It is therefore in the absence of any appeal from their organizations, especially trade unions, that hundreds of thousands of workers and young people began to demonstrate every Saturday in France, using the method of the Yellow Vests, which reappear moreover in these demonstrations. They do not occur at all at the call of the far right (some sectors, such as the TV columnist Éric Zemmour and the mayor of Béziers, Robert Ménard, support Macron's measures), but the latter benefits from it and he even went to some rallies, allowing the government and sectors of the left and unions who do not want to engage in battle, to denounce them.

Likewise, the references to the yellow star and to anti-Semitic persecutions are totally misplaced, and are sometimes made by anti-Semitic conspirators, but their frantic media and political uses are aimed at all the protests against the health pass, delivered to an amalgam of the same type and the same level.

In fact, the movement is rising, the presence of union branches is growing and not that of the far right, the anti-Macron tone is fundamental. The third wave against Macron and his regime has begun, following those of late 2018 and late 2019.

The pure and unblemished activist who does not want to compromise himself with confusion and who wants to highlight the urgency of mass vaccination, will of course have some setbacks in current gatherings, especially as the place of confusion and confusionists was facilitated by the official left rejecting this movement as a whole. Indeed, it is probably still impossible in the current situation to chant "Vaccination for all!" in these demonstrations, where "anti-vax " ideas circulate. Who is to blame?

But it is quite possible to discuss the issue there if you do not make it a screen against the mobilization all together against the health pass and against Macron. Because, on this level, the real movement finds its way: "Macron, your pass, we don't want it, nor you!" and "Macron, your pass will not last the winter, and neither will you!"

Such slogans do not come from the far right and there are a thousand times more on the left in the real sense of the word than all the activists wanting to lecture the masses. They indicate the direction we need to take - including, and most importantly, whether we are really in favor of generalized immunization!

The government has set a deadline itself: September 15. The CGT and SUD railroad federations threaten a general strike if the sanctions, suspension of wages and dismissal, fall against workers not vaccinated on that day. To get from here to there is a matter of political confrontation, against the leaderships, apparatuses and activists sectors that have helped Macron and are helping him by leaving the movement against him or by slandering it, which should help the masses to put their unions in the fight, achieving unity against Macron.

To stop him is to drive him out, to drive him out, especially a few months before the presidential elections, it is to turn your back on them by opening up the crisis of the regime - a revolutionary crisis in France seeking a democratic political outcome, a well-founded regime on democracy, hence the importance of the discussion on a genuine constituent assembly, imposed by the destruction of this state: its president, and with him his prefects, his rectors, his directors of ARS (Regional Health Agencies) .

Comrades, don't be afraid! This is not a reactionary wave rising in France. Is it confusing? We know it well. Any great movement is confused. This movement comes from afar and seeks to go far. It is the duty of revolutionaries to help the movement to confront power and ultimately overthrow it. And that's how you overcome confusion.