

France imposes return to school without protections against COVID-19

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16 September 2020

In order to return the economy to normal despite the pandemic, the French government is abandoning whatever safety measures were previously taken for the restart of classes. This is proceeding despite the recent surge in cases of COVID-19, with over 10,000 cases discovered on September 12 in France alone.

What this policy signifies can clearly be seen in Spain where the resurgence of COVID-19 is also well underway. The right-wing Madrid regional prime minister, Isabel Ayuso, declared: “It is probable that practically all children, in one way or another, will be infected by the coronavirus.” That is what is in store for children and their families across Europe if the working class does not oppose the forced reopening of schools.

In the case of France’s September restart of the school year, distance learning has been abandoned: all pupils must be present in overcrowded classrooms. And while teachers moved between classrooms during the partial school reopening in June, now pupils will have to move between classes through overcrowded corridors. This “intermingling,” to which the minister was previously opposed, is now accepted.

As for school buses, recreation periods and meals, “intermingling” is also the rule. Everything is returning to pre-lockdown conditions, with minor adjustments. An epidemic explosion in schools is in the making, with masks being the only protective barrier, and only then for middle and high school pupils. In any case, masks are not very effective in environments where social distancing is lacking.

To force parents back to work at all costs, no plans are made to look after pupils whose classes are forced to close due to cases of COVID-19. Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer bluntly told BFM-TV on September 7: “We are planning for parental leave in the event of school closures.” Parental leave is time off

work without pay and therefore an enormous cost to workers’ families.

Nevertheless, infections are rising rapidly. The government announced last Thursday it would reactivate payments for partially laid-off workers in the private sector, authorized absences of public sector workers, and absences for one parent only if schools or classes are shut down. The obvious aim is to avoid a social explosion.

The criteria for closures of classes and schools are vague. The decision is in the hands of local government officials in consultation with regional health authorities. The ministry refuses to communicate the list of classes and schools closed and only provides limited vague data on classes and establishments concerned.

Information is being concealed, as during the first COVID-19 wave at the beginning of the year, when it proved impossible to find out about the situation in the retirement homes. For local information, one must consult the regional press. The militant “Red Pen” teachers group also offers an online unofficial map application identifying closures at the national level.

On September 7, Blanquer announced 28 teaching establishments and 262 classes had been closed since the school reopening due to COVID-19.

The “Red Pens” have located more than 1,200 establishments affected by COVID-19 as of last Sunday. This confirms the explosive growth of infections. The Education Ministry is mainly only closing classes and not schools, despite the “intermingling” risk described above, increasing the risks of contagion.

Another increasingly difficult problem is distinguishing COVID-19 from other pathologies. While only a few children have started to catch colds as it is still before the end of summer, family doctors are

already overwhelmed with calls after children were denied access to school because they had symptoms of unidentified illnesses that might be COVID-19.

Parents are being advised to keep children at home if their temperature exceeds 38°C. On the other hand, guidelines for teachers and school principals refer to various “clinical signs” that could indicate COVID-19. Educational establishments are denying access to more and more children, above all in primary schools and kindergartens.

All this is panicking parents, who do not know when they should test the child for COVID-19. That is considerably increasing the number of days off work for sick children. Days off are limited, however, and parents must bear the costs, unless the work contract specifies employer responsibility.

Given that COVID-19 is in any case contagious before symptoms appear and that children’s cases are more often asymptomatic than adults, these measures will not contain the epidemic. The confusion between COVID-19 and common colds and flus will grow as the number of cases increase with the start of seasonal winter illnesses.

Before the school year restarted, Prime Minister Jean Castex could think of nothing better to propose than to “avoid allowing grand-dad and grandma go pick up the kids from school.”

The current television campaign in favor of maintaining social distancing to protect senior citizens perfectly illustrates this attitude. It gives the impression that French retirees live unhurried lives in spacious apartments or opulent villas, allowing them to carefully organize contacts with their children and grandchildren. This represents in a concentrated form the condescending contempt with which the bourgeoisie considers the situation of the working class.

Working class districts have already paid a heavy price in the pandemic. Low-paid workers have played an essential role in guaranteeing continued functioning of the economy during the lockdown, often without protective equipment. They have suffered large numbers of infections compared to the rest of the population. One study (in French) shows that mortality rates were twice as high in poor districts than in others. Bad living conditions and conditions at the workplace are the probable reasons for explaining this difference.

In poorer working class districts housing is cramped

and several generations of the same family are often grouped together in one apartment. This is often the case of immigrant workers who have more problems accessing housing. Even if the elderly avoid picking up children from school, contamination will spread rapidly in these working class areas, this time via their children, as the epidemic invades the education system.

While the epidemic is resurging, the government is making miserly savings on the backs of workers. It decided by decree, applicable starting September 1, to drastically reduce the number of categories of vulnerable people able to benefit from partial time off at work due to chronic pathologies. Authorizations for absences of close relatives of vulnerable people were also scrapped.

The decree was promulgated without taking into account the opinions of patient associations, which are outraged.

The situation is particularly a problem for teachers and school staff in contact with children. Those whose health is fragile will be obliged to use overcrowded public transport if they live in a big city or suburbs and will be exposed to potentially infected children. The situation is even more dangerous in primary schools, where pupils do not wear masks and where physical contact is greater.



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