

French universities enforce de facto herd immunity policy on COVID-19

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As part of its murderous herd immunity policy, the French government forced universities and schools to reopen with a near full program of in-person instruction in early September. The government's aggressive university reopening campaign has benefitted from the critical support of the unions and pseudo-left political organizations.

In the month since the reopening, COVID-19 cases in France have accelerated rapidly, quadrupling from 4,982 cases per day on September 1 to 20,330 on October 9. As early as September 13, 12 clusters were reported at universities throughout the country, and on October 2, Frédérique Vidal, the minister for Higher Education, Research and Innovation, admitted 40 French higher education institutions were closed due to outbreaks. A recent report from the UK showed that half of new infections were from schools and universities, exposing the causal link between reopening and the spread of COVID-19 in the wider population.

Young people act as the primary spreaders of disease through the population and, contrary to pseudo-scientific claims promoted by the bourgeois media, are themselves vulnerable to the virus. Official government data shows that since the beginning of the pandemic, at least 40 people under the age of 30 have died from COVID-19 in France. Underlining the risk to college students, in September an otherwise healthy 19-year-old student in the US developed neurological complications from COVID-19 and tragically died.

In response to the rising tide of cases at universities, on October 5 Vidal's ministry decreed that universities in maximal alert areas must conduct in-person classes that do not exceed 50 percent of their nominal capacity. The only other measures taken by the ministry have been to recommend that universities enforce mask

wearing, encourage regular handwashing and a 7-day-quarantine for positive individuals, even though this latter measure runs contrary to the WHO's 14-day quarantine recommendation.

Even if these limited measures were adhered to, they do not protect students or prevent universities acting as vectors for the spread through the wider population. In reality, the reopening of universities has formed an integral part of the ruling class's herd immunity policy.

Students have taken to social media to expose and condemn the conditions this fall. Posting to #balancetafac on Twitter, Maxime, a history student, commented: "We talked about schools, companies, but never about universities. Insufficient means for distance learning, a too light protocol, physical distances not respected"

Another student, at Paris II Panthéon Assas, posted a video exposing dangerous conditions at the university. Quentin, a student at the Sorbonne, wrote, "In universities all over France, it seems that the virus does not exist. The state is responsible for this."

With crowded corridors and dining halls, as well as the close quarters and shared facilities of university residence halls, students cannot protect themselves. Another issue regularly raised by students is that lecture halls and dining facilities at universities often have little air circulation and, in some cases, do not even have windows.

A student at the École Normale Supérieure told the WSWs that the university's administration failed to notify students that a classmate tested positive for the virus only one day after attending a lecture. It wasn't until two weeks after the incident occurred that students were informed. In an email to the student the administration declared, "people present in the same classroom were not declared 'contact cases,'" and then

because no one else in the class had been symptomatic “you were not informed.”

The school cynically added this was proof that “when applied strictly (spacing, masks, disinfection), positive people do not contaminate other people in the same classroom.”

The potential consequences of this recklessness are deadly. How many students, not knowing of their exposure, continued to attend other classes, returned to shared residences, or even visited family members during this time?

The university administration’s utter disregard for student safety exposes Macron’s insistence that we must learn to “live with the virus” as a euphemism for uncontrolled spread through the population. Students are expected to get the virus, and when this does occur this information should be suppressed so that students have “no need to overreact.” Of course, by “overreaction” they mean that students take measures necessary to protect themselves and their acquaintances.

The French ruling class, mirroring the policy enforced by the financial aristocracy across the globe, have been planning to implement a policy of herd immunity since the beginning of the first confinement. The reopening of universities and schools is a crucial part of the plan to restart the extraction of profit from the working class which is desperately needed to back up the €750 billion handed to the European banks in March.

Despite having months to increase teaching resources, ensure access to high-quality internet for all and train professors to maximize the effectiveness of online learning before September, the state and university administrations instead worked to downplay the deadly implications of a return to in-person instruction.

Following these false assurances from the government, many students signed expensive rental contracts with the *Centre régional des œuvres universitaires et scolaires* or private landlords. This has ensured the continued flow of money to state-run halls, while students now face the prospect of months of online classes in tiny apartments with poor internet access, or returning home and endangering their families.

Other students reported that they were left uninformed about the status of their courses until days

before they were scheduled to begin, leading to a last-minute scramble to find housing for the upcoming year.

Middle-class organizations such as the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA) and the Solidaires student union offer no way forward to defend French students’ health and rights. Sauvons la recherche, a researchers advocacy group affiliated to Solidaires student union, republished a reactionary open letter originally published in *Le Parisien* on September 10 which declared, “We cannot live in fear.” Meanwhile the NPA has supported the reopening of schools.

For all their ostensible rejection of capitalism, these organizations shamelessly support and promote the dictates of the capitalist class.

Students across Europe and the US are facing the same deadly conditions. As the autumn term begins, a new wave of struggles against the herd immunity policy of capitalism and decades of crippling austerity in education is beginning throughout the world. This includes the mass occupation of 700 Greek high schools by students and teachers, the Brazilian teachers strike, and the ongoing graduate student struggles at universities across the US.

Students, youth and workers across the world are jointly confronting the deadly imposition of herd immunity by capitalist governments. As the world economic and public health crises worsen, the working class’s struggle against global capitalism is intensifying. This is the social force to which students must turn in the struggle for their own safety and rights to a high-quality education and standard of living.

First and foremost, this means totally breaking from the various bankrupt Stalinist, Maoist and bourgeois movements that have previously dominated student politics since the upheavals of May 1968 and seriously engaging with the history of the working class and its vanguard, the Trotskyist movement as embodied in the International Committee of the Fourth International and the Parti de l’égalité socialiste.



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