

French students denounce inadequate partial lockdown

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On Thursday evening, French President Emmanuel Macron reluctantly placed university students and limited sections of non-essential production in lockdown. Without adequate financial support, learning resources, healthy living spaces and reliable internet access, France's two-and-a-half million students face an uncertain future.

The measures ostensibly taken to combat the rapid rise of COVID-19 in France are far too little, far too late. The cynical decision to move student education online is in reality an attempt to maintain the fiction of a serious and scientific response to the pandemic. Macron, Prime Minister Jean Castex and Health Minister Olivier Véran are pursuing a murderous policy of herd immunity. Schools and workplaces remain open, and public transportation is running.

The tens of thousands of daily infections over the past two weeks will become thousands of deaths over the next month. The maintenance of open schools and workplaces, which ensure that the virus continues to propagate, is the precondition to continue the extraction of profits from the working class.

Facing months of isolation, online classes that are not adequately prepared, pitiful financial support in the most uncertain of times and the continued threat of catching the deadly virus, French students have taken to social media to express their anger and confusion over the latest set of lockdown measures.

Many pointed to the contradiction between the confinement and keeping schools and workplaces open. Paul tweeted, "Only the people who do not work and who are not in primary or secondary school are confined... it is a confinement, but on the other hand you can go busting your ass at work."

Another student, Zahrla, added, "Explain to me how this is going to be a lockdown. Almost everyone is still

working, very few schools and stores are closed, finally the only ones confined are university students?"

For many students, the new measures have only compounded their preexisting conditions of precarity. Samuel Demarche tweeted at CROUS Versailles, "I have been waiting for the re-examination of my [bursary]... I'm going to lose my student job with the confinement, I have no other income. I don't know how I'm going to eat."

Germain, a nurse and law student in Grenoble, said: "The situation is becoming very tense in my city. Our services are starting to be saturated and our caregivers are getting sick... The situation is deteriorating, and our doctors are warning us that our quality of care will be impacted. We will have to make choices regarding resuscitation."

Student jobs and internships, which are often the only means for students to pay rent and feed themselves, have been cut immediately with the onset of the new pandemic. Mustafa asked the CROUS residence hall accountant, "Can't you waive the rent for November? Many students have lost their student jobs because of the lockdown." In fact, a major motivator for forcing a return to campus despite the inevitable spread of the virus was to maintain rental income for the state and private landlords across the country.

Many students also left their place of study to return home over the Toussaint holiday. This has caused confusion as students have been forced to scramble to pick up their belongings and textbooks in the 24-hour period between Macron's announcement and Thursday evening's 9 p.m. curfew. One mother commented, "It's a big mess: my son is a student in Paris, he didn't take all his stuff (notes + clothes) for his week of vacations, impossible to find a train ticket for tomorrow, his friends are in the same situation."

Needless to say, the movement of hundreds of thousands of students between cities across France at this time will further accelerate the spread of the virus through the country.

Under these conditions, students' mental health is also under increasing strain. Poor mental health is an ongoing issue that has only been exacerbated by the pandemic. Corentin, an L2 student in history, wrote, "[remote learning] will not only cause death in the soul. Precariousness will continue to increase. The State will do nothing. The mental health of students will continue to deteriorate."

Many students who come from unstable family homes face an impossible choice between total isolation in tiny student dorm rooms or a return to a damaging home life.

After unclear instructions from the central government and universities, there is mounting confusion among students. On Thursday, Castex announced that practical classes at universities may be exempt from the lockdown. This has led many universities to try to work around rules to stay open. A student named Valentin tweeted: "The university is unbelievable to tell us to stay in our student housing while we find out if we have face-to-face classes and I'm already gone before the beginning of the confinement like EVERYBODY."

As part of this campaign, some administrators still cling to the government's claims that universities are not major propagators of the virus. The president of Paris Sorbonne, Thomas Clay, said: "The university is not a place of infection, it is outside that young people infect themselves. I was hoping for a lesser restriction."

Opposing online learning, he continued, "if it's just a matter of filming from a distance, it's useless, and, above all, it's going to cause a high dropout rate among students. You have to be able to adapt the pedagogy, there's a whole course to be rethought in each case." In other words, classes should continue in person, because the provision of online courses would require a major investment of resources.

International students have also been left isolated and without clear instructions. Without even a provisional timeline for the lockdown and the possibility that universities may start in person lectures at short notice, students are unsure whether a return home will affect their future studies.

The second lockdowns throughout Europe are themselves a product of the failure and refusal of the capitalist class to contain the virus. Faced with wildcat strikes in Italy, Spain and elsewhere demanding the idling of non-essential production to combat the virus, European governments imposed an initial lockdown in March, handing over hundreds of billions of euros to the banks and corporations. The initial confinement dramatically slowed the virus spread.

The reopening policy was aimed at ensuring that the massive corporate handouts would be repaid with profits extracted from the labor of the working class.

European governments ignored scientists' warnings that the reopening would lead to a catastrophic second wave. Had containment measures been maintained, and non-essential production stopped, the present outbreak would not now be underway. As hundreds of people die each day, the deadly implications of this policy are only beginning to emerge. The very same disregard for the lives and well-being of students and educators that drove this initial crime is now leaving students without adequate food, internet access and housing.



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