

# French teachers' strikes mount against school openings as pandemic surges

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Strikes and protests by French teachers and students are expanding against the Macron government's policy of keeping schools open with no effective protections, allowing coronavirus to spread unhindered among students, teachers and their families.

Teachers across France are continuing to organise strike action at local school meetings. They are faced with conditions that are catastrophic. Social distancing measures are essentially non-existent. More than 30 children are commonly crammed into classrooms with little to no ventilation. Images continue to be shared on social media showing hundreds of students sitting side-by-side in cafeterias and walking in hallways.

Students are organising protests at school entrances to demand social distancing measures and the closure of their schools, fearful that they will be responsible for the deaths of loved ones.

The pandemic in France has surged out of control. Another 394 people died on Wednesday, 854 on Tuesday, and 416 on Monday. Another 540 people were admitted to urgent care beds in the past 24 hours, with the total now at 4,080, and over 40,000 people were infected.

Yesterday in Paris, teachers at the Collège Guillaume Budé published a statement announcing a strike vote of 75 percent in the school to demand social distancing measures be put in place to prevent the spread of the virus. On Wednesday, 20 teachers at the Mozart high school in Le Blanc-Mesnil continued strike action from the day before. In Montpellier, the teachers voted for indefinite strike action on Tuesday until a safe health care protocol has been put in place.

Sara, who has taught Italian for five years, and is now teaching at three different schools located an hour outside Paris, described the situation there to the *World Socialist Web Site* yesterday. "Since September there

has been no health protocol at all. In one school they now clean more often and we have gel and masks in the class. Otherwise everything is the same: no social distancing, the canteen is open and crammed full, the corridors are full, public transport is packed.

"When students contract coronavirus they stay home for one or two weeks, but often we are not told. I find that there are absences in my class, and only later after asking do I find out it was COVID-19. In general, only the school directors know the reason that students are absent. And everything just continues as if nothing was happening. Normally after three students in the same class get coronavirus, it is supposed to close. But this way, it's hard to know."

"A student of my colleague with comorbidities got coronavirus and ended up in the hospital," she continued. "But no one knew—only the head principal. My colleague kept setting the child homework. He only found out by chance when the parents wrote to him to ask for the homework. That's how we find out."

Asked what measures ought to be taken to address this situation, Sara said: "the problem is that measures should have been taken from the beginning of the reopening in September. The students should have been divided in groups and attended school in alternating blocks. In my [Italian] classes, students come from different levels. And that is the case for every language. That means there's a continuous mixing of students. There should have been no more than 10 to 15 students per class or less and a strict social distancing. Now, students are on top of each other the whole day!"

"It was an obvious measure," she said, "but it was not done. A system of ventilation was needed in the classes. This is completely absent. We know now how important that is. In my class I cannot even open the windows. In many schools they've been sealed to

prevent suicides.”

Sara said she saw many principal factors driving the school opening policy of the Macron administration. “First of all,” she said, “at the beginning of September there were many ‘doctors’ who were saying that it could be a ‘strategy’ to make the virus spread among the youngest group of the population in order to attain herd immunity. This, I believe, is one of the motivations, because, even if the schools were opened just so the parents could go to work, that does not explain the complete absence of any protective measures. The cotton masks that have been distributed, the only ‘real’ measure, are not effective.”

“Then there is the economic motivation. The parents must go to work and we can’t leave the children at home. It’s obvious that in primary and middle school we are baby-sitters. In May [after the first lockdown] the schools were reopened for three weeks before the holiday break: what could be the pedagogical use of this?”

Responsibility lay with both the government, the media and the trade unions, Sara said. “Before the holidays, despite the numerous hospital alerts, the message on the TV was: Go enjoy your holidays, everything is under control. ... The trade unions knew very well that a second wave was possible. But there was no initiative. Nothing. A complete silence about the coronavirus.”

The trade unions insisted that they were not calling for teachers to strike, but that teachers should individually use their legally protected right to withdraw their labour if placed in a dangerous situation. This was consciously aimed at isolating and smothering the opposition among teachers to the government’s policy.

“In fact the right to withdraw your labour is very complicated,” Sara explained. “You risk a lot, and of course, you are an individual. To invoke this right there must be conditions. In September it was practically impossible, because the schools just applied the (non-existent) rules of the health protocol.

“Now it is necessary to close schools, resume online learning, which is not a long-term solution but a measure for transition, in order to get control of the epidemic and work on real concrete measures for allowing classes,” Sara said. “This must be organised from below, with the teachers who are on the ground.”

The trade unions are actively working to suppress the growing struggle by teachers. Yesterday, the national education union SUD published a statement calling for a national one-day strike next Tuesday, November 10. This is under conditions where teachers are already organising strike action in schools and when the virus is spreading by tens of thousands every day.

In reality, the unions have supported the school reopening policy of the government from the beginning. They are collaborating with Macron to ensure that schools can remain open, that parents can remain at work, and that profits can continue to flow, no matter how many people die. The latest strike call is aimed at maintaining control over the growing action of teachers, in order the better to smother it.

Teachers must instead strike out on a different basis. Independent committees of action must be formed in every school, composed of educators themselves. A strike must be organised to demand the immediate closure of schools while the pandemic is stopped. Full pay must be granted to teachers as well as at least one parent for those who are forced to remain at home to mind their child. Massive resources must be invested into the education system to provide high quality learning, including online and in small groups, as determined by the committees of educators themselves.

The Macron administration has made clear its hostility to any measures to stop the virus’ spread in the schools. On Wednesday, the government announced that it would consider a reduction of class sizes, but this only on a case-by-case basis, and only for the most senior students.

It is responding to student protests for the closure of schools with riot police and tear gas. It is determined to sacrifice the lives of hundreds of thousands for the profits of the capitalist class. Against the ruling class’ homicidal policy, the working class must advance its own independent political perspective to save lives, based on the fight for a workers government and socialism.



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