

For a general strike to close schools! Form rank-and-file safety committees of teachers, parents and students!

Parti de l'égalité socialiste (France)
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Strikes are spreading against French President Emmanuel Macron's school openings policy, which is permitting the coronavirus to spread rapidly through schools across France.

Thousands of teachers will join a nationwide strike today. Since the end of school holidays last Monday, dozens of schools have already closed, as teachers held local staff meetings and voted to refuse to go in to work. This comes as Pfizer's successful vaccine trials holds out the prospect that a lockdown policy could allow workers and youth to shelter at home, protected from the virus and the growing infections and deaths, until they can be vaccinated.

Conditions in schools are catastrophic. The Macron administration's promises of "strengthened" health protocols have been exposed as lies. Social distancing in schools is virtually non-existent. Classrooms are packed with anywhere up to 35 students. Images widely shared on social media show hundreds of youth packed on top of one another into corridors and canteens. Classrooms have little to no ventilation, many with windows sealed shut.

State policy works not to detect emerging coronavirus clusters in schools, but to cover them up. Teachers report not being told if students in their class are absent because they have contracted the virus, making it impossible for other students and teachers to be alerted.

Students have protested, blocking school entrances with bins and demanding school closures. Last Tuesday saw protests at more than a dozen schools, in Paris and southern France, that continued last week. "We are denouncing the absence of measures against the coronavirus," one student said. "We should not be here. We risk getting the virus and passing it on to our

parents."

The Macron government responded to student protests with police repression and tear gas. Dozens of students were fined for participating in unsafe public gatherings, though their protests were precisely to demand the application of safe lockdown measures rejected by Macron.

Teachers and students in France are mobilising as catastrophic loss of life is looming. On Saturday, France surpassed another grim milestone: 40,000 deaths. In the last 24 hours, another 306 people died, and a record 60,000 tested positive for the virus. The number of urgent care patients has risen by more than a third in just a week, to 4,421. Within the month, France's urgent care beds will likely be overwhelmed; 92 percent are already full in the Paris area.

France's own scientific council has warned that the limited lockdowns, with public transport, schools and non-essential industries kept open, will cut the reproduction rate of the virus (the average number of people infected by one sick person) to between 0.9 and 1.2. This means the number of new cases will either fall very slowly, or keep growing exponentially.

Partial lockdowns adopted in France and other European countries—with bars and restaurants closed and social interactions ended, but schools and non-essential industries kept open—are not halting the contagion. Had a lockdown been ordered in September, when scientists were already warning that the virus was resurgent, countless lives could have been saved.

European governments' policies are not determined by scientific considerations, however, but the profit interests of the capitalist class. They keep workplaces open so that profits can continue to flow, however

many lives are lost. Keeping schools open is a central element of this strategy. Public schools function as child-minding centers so that parents can be herded into workplaces.

The state's refusal to impose even the most basic social-distancing measures shows that it does not oppose the spread of the virus. It pursues a "herd immunity" policy in all but name.

Urgent action is essential to avert catastrophic loss of life. Schools, universities and non-essential workplaces must be closed, and workers provided with adequate resources to confine safely.

For teachers to organise a successful struggle for a rational, scientific policy against COVID-19, it is necessary to clearly distinguish the political forces aligned against them.

The trade unions did not call today's strike to organise a struggle. The initiative for the strike came from rank-and-file teachers themselves, who voted to strike in local school assembly meetings last week. The unions in fact helped organise Macron's school opening policy, and did nothing to mobilise opposition to the disastrous conditions in schools. Only as it became clear that teachers were taking matters into their own hands did the unions call today's strike, in an effort to maintain control of and smother it. SUD and the other unions are not calling for the closure of schools, but for vague improvements in Macron's health protocol.

The Socialist Equality Party urges teachers and students to form their own rank-and-file safety committees in every school, independent of the unions, to take the control of their strike in their own hands. An appeal must be made for a united struggle with educators across Europe.

Any introduction of in-person learning must be predicated on a massive reduction of COVID-19 cases, and the adoption of scientifically-based health protocols. Rank-and-file committees are the only means for teachers, students and their families to ensure such protocols are in place.

A massive and immediate investment in education is required to provide students and teachers the necessary resources and staffing to permit a transition to online learning. The government's claims that there is "no money" for this are patent lies; trillions of euros have been handed to the banks and corporations in Europe in

2020. The resources exist; however, they are monopolised by the corporate and financial elite.

The essential political issue is: which class will determine the response to the crisis? The capitalists' policy is "herd immunity" and mass death. Workers are fighting to save lives and stop the pandemic. Waging this struggle means fighting for the working class to take power and build governments across Europe pursuing socialist policies. Turning banks and corporations into public utilities, democratically controlled by the working class, will provide the resources to fight the pandemic and guarantee high living standards for all, based on genuine equality.



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