As wildcat teacher strikes continue

French government escalates cover-up of COVID-19 infections in schools

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On November 6, the French Ministry of National Education released a press statement alleging that only 3,528 students and 1,165 staff at French schools had tested positive for COVID-19 that week. However, statistics from the Ministry of Public Health show that in just the first three days of the week 25,151 people between 0 and 19 years old tested positive for the virus.

With the vast majority of 0–19-year-olds being school-age pupils and only 50,000 children being home-schooled in France, the discrepancy between these two numbers points to a systematic government cover-up of COVID-19 transmission in French schools.

This is not even the full story for last week's pupil cases. Given that nearly half of the week's national cases were reported on Thursday and Friday (58,046 and 60,486, respectively), the number of recorded student cases will likely exceed 40,000 when the data becomes available. Furthermore, with an average test positivity rate of over 20 percent over the past week, the actual rate of infection is likely even higher.

The virus is now out of control throughout France. Between November 2 and 6, more than 190,000 positive tests were recorded in the French population. On Saturday, a record 86,852 cases were reported. Underscoring the danger posed to schoolchildren by the virus, 182 individuals in the 0–19 age group are currently hospitalised with COVID-19 in France. Across all age groups, in the week from November 2 to 8, 3,420 people died from COVID-19.

The government's latest set of lies comes in the face of increasingly militant opposition from French teachers. Beginning last Monday and continuing throughout the week, thousands of teachers organised strike action independently of the unions in opposition to the reopening of schools on November 2, after the All Saints holiday. Across the country, pupils joined their teachers' strike action. In Paris, this led to violent police attacks against striking teenagers.

The Education Ministry's criminal methods are a response to this strike action. Its aim is to present schools as safe in order to gain public support for its effort to pressure teachers back into deadly classroom environments. From the point of view of the ruling class across Europe, schools must be kept open so that profit can continue to be extracted from hundreds of millions of working parents.

This attempted cover-up of the extent of the virus's spread in schools follows similar tactics used by the government in French schools and universities last month. That two official organs of the government are producing contradictory COVID-19 figures speaks to the profound nature of the crisis engulfing the French state in the face of increasing deaths and teacher strikes.

Following the press release, Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer doubled down on his ministry's narrative. He claimed that the number of cases was "under control" and that transmission within the education system was "below the proportions found in the rest of the population." He added that he wanted schools to stay open "at all costs"—these costs being the lives of students and teachers.

The manipulation of these figures has been complemented by a protocol designed to restrict students' and teachers' knowledge of cases within schools. When a pupil is confirmed as COVID-19 positive, only the head teacher is told. Despite the fact that masks only reduce the chance of infection, if those exposed wear a mask they are not considered contact

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cases or informed of their exposure. On Monday, Joe, a middle school pupil, tweeted, “At school today six students tested positive in year six. The class continued as if nothing had happened.”

Eric Menonville, a science teacher, noted on Twitter that the same lies had been used in the effort to enforce a return to workplaces, “It’s all a joke. The ministry of labor told us less than 1 percent of transmission happens at work and the minister of national education told us there is less than 1 percent in the institutions. So where are the infections happening?”

The censorship of case numbers at a local and national level is a murderous crime against the working class. How many parents have sent their children to school believing there are no cases? How many teachers have gone to work believing they are safe? How many pupils have gone on to infect their parents, grandparents and friends because they were not informed that they were exposed to the virus? How many people will die as a result of these transmission paths?

In response to the exposure of Blanquer’s lies, pseudo-left figures, including Alex Corbière, a La France Insoumise deputy, have only demanded that the minister show the real figures.

This half-hearted response makes no appeal to the thousands who have taken strike action in the last week, nor does it call for the necessary shutdown of in-person education. Similarly, the unions have refused to call a nation-wide strike and have actively isolated the groups of teachers who have taken independent action.

This only underscores the fact that teachers and students must form rank-and-file committees that are independent of the unions and pseudo-left forces. On the basis of a fight against the herd immunity policy of all European governments, their aim must be to expand and coordinate the strikes across the continent.

As well as the immediate closure of schools, strikers must demand the implementation of a national lockdown including all educational institutions, government offices, and businesses, with exceptions for essential food, health, and logistics workers. This must be complemented by a rapid expansion of testing and tracing capacity and the provision of adequate resources to families and teachers to ensure the highest possible quality remote learning.

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