IYSSE meeting calls for a European-wide school strike against the policy of herd immunity

Our reporters
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On Monday, amid the devastating escalation of the coronavirus pandemic in Europe, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) held an online meeting: “For a European-wide school strike against the epidemic!”

The speakers included Christoph Vandreier, vice-chairman of the Sozialistischen Gleichheitspartei (SGP, Socialist Equality Party) in Germany, Will Morrow of the Parti de l’Égalité Socialiste (PES, Socialist Equality Party) in France, Tania Kent of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee in the UK, and Genevieve Leigh, chair of the IYSSE in the US. Several hundred viewers followed the live stream, the recording of which is available here.

In his opening remarks, WSWS reporter and IYSSE member Gregor Link noted that the pandemic was out of control on a global scale: “Over 50 million people have been infected and at least 1.26 million people have lost their lives. This horrific death toll, which in Europe and America surpasses anything that has happened since the Second World War, is the result of a deliberate policy of the ruling class.”

Based on current media reports and a compilation of available infection figures, Link reported on the dramatic situation in hospitals and intensive care units throughout Europe. While in Italy and France COVID-19 patients have had to be flown abroad for treatment, physicians in Germany assume that all intensive care beds would be occupied by the beginning of next month at the latest. In many German federal states, the number of infected students and teachers had multiplied within a single week.

Christoph Vandreier was the first speaker to address in detail the perspective of a European-wide school strike, placing it in the context of the growing resistance of the working class against the policy of “herd immunity.” He explained:

“Schools and day-care centres are to be kept open at all costs, so as not to endanger economic operations and thus the profits of the rich. If non-essential businesses, schools and day-care centres are not immediately closed, the overloading of the health care system and premature death of millions of people are inevitable. The lives of the old and weak are to be sacrificed on the altar of profit. To implement this completely unpopular policy, the ruling classes are already openly reviving the ideology of the Nazis.”

Vandreier meticulously detailed how the murderous herd immunity policy was being implemented by all political parties, concluding that workers and youth faced a struggle against the entire capitalist system:

“A school strike can only be the prelude to a comprehensive struggle by the entire European and international working class. Such a strike must force the immediate closure of schools, with parents who must look after their children being paid their full wage.”

Finally, Vandreier identified the central demands that must be at the heart of this struggle, stressing that “rank-and-file committees must become the basis of a counter-power that counterposes the programme of international socialism to the capitalist logic of inequality, war and disease.

Genevieve Leigh, who spoke to the meeting from Michigan, painted a stark picture of the social and political crisis in the United States.

“The pandemic claims 1,000 lives every day. Hospitals in many cities and states are overloaded. There is far too little testing—contact tracing is almost non-existent. Unemployment benefits have been cut for millions of people who have lost their jobs and can no longer find work. Families devastated by the loss of a loved one have to pay outrageously high medical bills that threaten to plunge them into financial ruin.

“Under these conditions, there is absolutely no way to conduct face-to-face classes safely and responsibly—but that is exactly what the ruling class is doing. Contrary to the claim that young people are not at risk, there are many young, bright and previously healthy children among the fatalities in the United States.”

Most recently, Leigh said, 61,000 children had tested positive within a single week. In total, the virus had been diagnosed in over 850,000 children, one-ninth of all US cases. At least 121 children had died. She concluded:

“The virus is of natural origin, but the effects and consequences I am describing are related to the society in which the virus came about. The crisis facing workers and youth is global, and it requires a global solution.”

High school students and IYSSE members Clemens and Joshua also spoke at the meeting. Clemens, who is completing a year volunteering in a day-care centre near Munich, reported on the completely unprotected working conditions. Although a colleague had tested positive, the health department had refused to order the appropriate quarantine and testing measures in time and to close the facility. So far, by pure luck, no one else had been infected.

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IYSSE member Joshua from Nuremberg gave the audience an insight into the conditions in schools: “In Bavaria, school operations have started again today. Although the number of infections is increasing more and more rapidly, nothing has changed in terms of maintaining regular operations. We still have 20-30 students and one teacher in a classroom and the only ‘protective measures’ are the compulsory wearing of masks and airing classrooms.”

The German state governments’ announcement that they would partially close schools when the number of infections increased had turned out to be a lie. “We are now around 200 incidences and still nothing has changed.” Students are “abused as guinea pigs of the ruling class to achieve the goal of so-called ‘herd immunity.’” Joshua appealed to all participants to join the IYSSE and SGP and set up rank-and-file committees to prepare a school strike and a general strike.

The second international speaker was Tania Kent from the UK. Kent is an elementary school teacher and a founding member of the UK Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. She explained that the catastrophic explosion of the pandemic on the continent had confirmed the early warnings of the IYSSE and the *World Socialist Web Site*. A fight against the policies underlying this development had to be conducted completely independently of all bourgeois parties and their trade unions.

“The education unions are responsible for this situation. They advise the government on the most reliable way to protect the economy. Three of the largest teachers’ unions [in the UK] have publicly supported the government’s policy and agreed to exclude schools from the lockdown measures. As we have foreseen, resistance to this is growing. On Thursday—the first day after the lockdown measures came into force in England—1,000 parents took part in a school boycott, which was supported by tens of thousands more.”

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee gave this opposition a voice and a perspective, Kent said. “The growing anger of teachers, pupils and parents must be directed towards the political programme of class struggle. Those who join our committee will lead this growing opposition. What is crucial is our call for European-wide action. This is at the heart of our perspective.”

The final contribution of the evening came from France, where thousands of courageous students and teachers, supported by parents, have organized strikes and protests against the deadly reopening of schools. Will Morrow, a member of the Parti de l’Égalité Socialiste, told the meeting, “The strike movement comes from the teachers at the grassroots level, not from the trade unions. Throughout the country, teachers at dozens of schools held meetings before classes began and voted not to enter the school buildings. The next day, students organized demonstrations at a dozen different schools and blocked building entrances with garbage cans.”

The demands of teachers and students, Morrow said, included immediate school closures, expansion of online teaching, halving class sizes, and a hygiene protocol for face-to-face teaching based on the latest scientific findings.

The Macron government, for its part, was responding to the protests and school strikes by sending in riot police units in combat gear to attack students with tear gas and clubs.

Morrow concluded: “The reaction of the Macron government illustrates the class nature of the forces that have allied themselves against students and workers across Europe. The ruling class is pursuing a policy that it knows will result in hundreds of thousands or millions of deaths. It considers this to be essential to maintain the profits of the companies during the pandemic and to recover the hundreds of billions of bailouts transferred to the corporations from the labour of the population. If old and frail people die and no longer need social spending, this is seen as a positive good. The capitalist class is not at war with the pandemic, it is at war with society.”

The working class, Morrow said, must counter this war with its own struggle for socialism by fighting for “the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of workers’ governments throughout Europe.”

This perspective was taken up by several participants in the ensuing discussion. Questions posed by audience members ranged from the importance of the development of a coronavirus vaccine, the connection between a school strike and a general strike, to a socialist programme to contain the pandemic and eradicate the virus.

At the end of the discussion, Christoph Vandreier reminded the audience that November 9 was the 82nd anniversary of “Kristallnacht” (“Night of Broken Glass,” when Hitler’s SA paramilitary forces launched a pogrom against Jews throughout Nazi Germany). For a long time, he said, the German ruling elite had been more and more openly reviving its fascist traditions. In the pandemic, right-wing extremist ideologies were being systematically promoted to enforce the policy of herd immunity.

Given this, during a general strike, Vandreier argued, the question of power would be posed with great urgency: “Who controls society? Is it the ruling class, in the interests of the financial oligarchy? Or is it the rank-and-file committees and active workers who were leading the general strike? The question is posed: Is the [guiding] social principle that of wealth, profiteering and the perverse enrichment of a few—or is the social principle the principle of equality and the needs of the people? This struggle can only be won by a socialist revolution.”

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