

As scientific council warns of “uncontrolled resurgence of epidemic”

## Macron government rejects national lockdown in France

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Yesterday, French authorities reported that 969 people had died in the space of 24 hours on December 29, bringing the official total in the past week to 2,376, and the total since the beginning of the pandemic to 64,078. Over ten thousand cases are being reported every day, though this is likely a significant underestimate due to reduced testing through the holiday period. Over 48 hours from December 24 to 25, more than 40,000 new cases were recorded. As of yesterday, 24,776 people remained hospitalized with COVID-19 in the country.

On Monday evening, Health Minister Olivier Véran appeared on the France 2 evening news following a meeting of the defense council that morning. Despite the catastrophic and accelerating situation in France, Véran announced that the government “reject[s] the idea of general or local lockdowns.” The only new measures announced on Tuesday were that twenty departments, predominantly in the East of France, may see curfew measures brought forward by two hours to 6:00 p.m., beginning on January 2. Crucially, these measures do not include the closure of schools, nor the stopping of non-essential work.

The Eastern departments are emerging as the new epicenters of the virus in France. In the week from December 18 to 24, the departments of Doubs, Ardennes, Meurthe-et-Moselle, and Alpes-Maritimes recorded incidence rates of over 300 per 100,000, or over twice the national average. On December 29, the Grand-Est region recorded 68 deaths, overtaking Île-de-France as the region with the highest daily death-toll, despite having under half of the capital region’s

population.

A document also made public on December 29 showed that the government-appointed COVID-19 Scientific Council warned leading ministers on December 23 that an “uncontrolled resumption of the epidemic is probable” in January. The council proposed three options, two of which included new lockdown measures to be implemented on December 28 in the one case, and January 2 in the other. The warning was not made public until six days later.

Desperate to avoid any disruption to the extraction of profit from French workers in the new year, the Macron government has instead opted to pursue the third option, described as a “later response” by the council that tweaks minor measures at a local level depending on the rate of hospital admissions. The council warned that this option “presents the risk of intervening too late and then leading to more severe, longer, and restrictive measures” at a later date.

Though not stated by the council’s report, the obvious implication is that it will also include additional preventable deaths. The Macron government is pursuing a policy that it knows will lead to tens of thousands of deaths and threaten to overwhelm the hospital system.

The extended curfew is a half-measure that will have a limited effect on the extent of the virus’ spread in the Eastern regions. In October, the national health authority reported that over 60 percent of COVID-19 clusters occurred in workplaces and schools. Nevertheless, Véran dismissed the findings as insignificant. A study published in November in *Nature*

found that “school closures in the United States have been found to reduce COVID-19 incidence and mortality by about 60 percent.” Another July study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that “school closure was associated with a significant decline in both incidence of COVID-19 and ... mortality.”

Despite Macron’s claims that “reason and science” should be the guide for the coronavirus response, his government’s murderous policy flies in the face of the advice of both government-appointed and independent scientists.

Véran used his appearance on France 2 to promote the approval of the vaccine in France on December 27. While the vaccine offers the very real possibility of controlling the virus in the long-term, its premature promotion as a success story is a cynical distraction from the government’s current policy of “herd immunity” that will lead to tens of thousands of extra deaths before the summer.

As of Tuesday evening, only 100 people had received their first dose in France. Even if the goal of one million vaccinations by the end of February is reached, millions would have to be vaccinated each week after that period to provide immunity to the general population before the end of the year. As was the case with the government’s widely promoted, but drastically underfunded, test and trace system implemented after the first lock-down which failed to ascertain over 90 percent of infections, the roll-out of the vaccine will be subordinated to the profit interests of the ruling elite.

Hundreds of billions that could have been used by the Macron government to expand testing and tracing capacity, hire more health care workers, and improve hospitals were instead handed over to large corporations and banks.

The government has only enacted limited measures to maintain the pretense of a fight against the virus. It ended the second, limited lockdown in December although its own sub-5000 daily case threshold for loosening restrictions was never close to being reached. As the second wave rapidly accelerated in October and November, workers were kept on the job, and the government used the police to violently force striking students into schools. Tens of thousands have died unnecessarily as a result of these policies.

Another concern is the detection in France on

December 26 of a more contagious variant of the virus first sequenced in the United Kingdom. In the space of the last 48 hours the UK has recorded more than 100,000 cases, approximately five times the number reported in France. It has already been reported across multiple European countries, including Spain, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, Finland and Sweden. Yesterday, German authorities revealed that the strain had been circulating in the country at least as early as November.

The emergence of a new and even more infectious strain of the virus only increases the urgency with which effective measures to control the virus must be introduced. A group of scientists at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine modelled the effect of the new variant on the spread of the virus in England. They concluded that “control measures of a similar stringency to the national lockdown implemented in England in November 2020 are unlikely to reduce the effective reproduction number  $R$  to less than 1, unless primary schools, secondary schools, and universities are also closed.”

Going into the worst of the cold season, the policy of keeping millions of workers at work and children in school—followed by capitalist governments across Europe—ensures that hundreds of thousands of lives will be lost in a horrific winter of death. With the vaccine only beginning to be rolled out, stopping this requires the closure of schools and non-essential production. The decisive question is the political mobilization of the working class to oppose the ruling elite’s politically-criminal policy and impose a scientifically-based fight against the virus.



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