Macron government refuses calls to cancel school reopenings as pandemic surges

Will Morrow
3 January 2021

Schools are reopening today in France after the holiday break today as the pandemic is continuing to surge out of control. The Macron government is rejecting calls by medical specialists, educators and parent groups for the cancellation or postponement of in-person classes.

The virus is spreading extremely rapidly throughout the country. The official tally of more than 3,400 cases in the last 24 hours is a vast underestimate—on December 31, more than 19,000 cases were reported. The Macron government has itself admitted that there are likely already 15,000 new cases every day. The seven-day rolling average for deaths remains just under 300, but 969 deaths were reported in a single day on December 28.

The situation is made all the more dangerous by the emergence of a new and even more contagious strain in the UK. The number of new cases being reported daily in the UK is several times higher than in France and Germany, and has exceeded 50,000 every day since December 29. The new variant has already been detected in over a dozen countries, including in France, Spain, Italy and Germany.

Leading medical specialists in France and Europe have publicly demanded that schools not be reopened. On Twitter, Professor Antoine Flafault, director of the Institute of Global Health in Geneva, tweeted on Saturday that "with the aggravation of the situation in the UK and Ireland, let's not commit the same mistake at the time of the first wave in Italy, no procrastination in Europe: let's not reopen schools at the beginning of January, but vaccinate, vaccinate, vaccinate. Accelerate the vaccination." Mahmoud Zureik, a teaching doctor in epidemiology in Paris, tweeted a call for the closure of schools for at least one week to allow a study of the spread of the virus.

In an open letter published Wednesday, the "Forgotten families and schools" organization published an open letter to the Macron government, demanding that "given the resurgence of the pandemic, the latest scientific information, as well as the enormous uncertainty concerning the new variant VUI-202012/01 of Sars-Cov-2," the "schools [should] not open on January 4."

The national teachers unions have called a one-day strike action in the education system on January 26. It is a rear-guard effort by the unions, which have worked closely with the Macron government to enforce the maintenance of in-person classes and suppress teachers' opposition. A strike in the energy sector has been called for two days later, on January 28.

At the reopening of classes at the beginning of November, teachers held impromptu assemblies outside buildings at dozens of schools before school and voted not to enter classrooms. They demanded the enforcement of safe conditions in classrooms, and posted statements on social media denouncing the unsafe conditions in their classrooms.

In the period since, none of these conditions have been resolved. Schools continue to be filled with anywhere up to 35 students at a time, with hundreds eating together in cafeterias, and children crammed into public transportation. The unions worked to suppress the strike action, opposed demands for the closure of schools and instead called demoralizing one-day "warning strikes" aimed at keeping teachers and students in classrooms. The Macron government deployed riot police to use teargas at over a dozen schools against striking students demanding their closure.

The unions are particularly concerned at the prospect of industrial action by teachers in Britain against the

© World Socialist Web Site

reopening of schools tomorrow. The education unions in Britain have been forced to advise teachers not to go to school today.

The Macron government is proceeding well aware that the reopening of schools will accelerate the spread of the virus. The director of Public Health France, Jérome Salomon, conceded in an interview with the *Journal du Dimanche* that the mixing of students after the holiday break "can reshuffle the cards of the epidemiological situation."

Referring to the new variants of the virus first detected in Britain and South Africa, Salomon pointed to reports that the new strain is particularly impacting school-age youth. The strains "affect particularly the youth, for whom the possibility of spreading the virus may be higher than in the general population. We must be very attentive in the school and university milieu," he said.

Professor Mark Walport, a member of the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies in Britain, told the BBC's Andrew Marr show that "a person [aged] between 12 and 16 is seven times more likely than others in a household to bring the infection into a household. And we know that there was a small dip in the amount of transmission in school children after half term, which went up again after they went back." A new report published by the Imperial College of London on the "Transmission of Sars-Cov-2 Lineage B.1.1.7 in England" notes that "available [genetic] data indicate a shift in the age composition of reported cases, with a larger share of under 20-year-olds among reported [variant] than [non-variant] cases."

The statements of medical specialists directly contradict the lying justification of the Macron administration for its policy. Speaking on Europe1 on December 20, Education Minister Blanquer declared that the delay of the opening of schools "is not the preferred option." He referred to unnamed studies "that have shown that in the school setting, we have succeeded in contaminating less than outside the school setting."

The government's policy has nothing to do with the science of combatting the virus, and less still with its professed concern for the psychological well-being of students. Its concern is to ensure that students be pushed into classrooms, so that parents can be pushed to work, and that corporate profits not be impacted by the pandemic. Its homicidal policy of profits before lives is responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands in France already and is leading toward a renewed upsurge of the virus that could be even more deadly than the previous year.

Under conditions of mass death, the French elite have done fabulously well throughout 2020. The 40 richest French billionaires are now worth $500 billion, up by more than $95 billion a year ago. The overwhelming majority of this gain has come from the rise of share prices in the fashion and luxury design industry, which has propelled the wealth of Bernard Arnault (shareholder in LVMH) and Francoise Bettencourt Meyers (L'Oréal). The French stock index has almost completely recouped all its initial losses from the beginning of the pandemic, due to the infusions of hundreds of billions in bailouts by the governments of France and across Europe.

In opposition to the ruling elite's policy of death, French teachers and students should form their own independent committees in every school, independent of the teachers unions. Strike action must be mobilised for the closure of in-person education and non-essential work, and the provision of vast resources to the education system to fund remote learning until a vaccine has been distributed throughout the population.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site