

French government determined to keep schools open as virus spreads

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As the spread of more infectious and dangerous variants of the coronavirus strain French hospitals, the Macron government is doubling down on its efforts to keep schools open. His policy is driven by the interests of the capitalist class, which is demanding that schools be kept open as holding pens for children so that their parents can continue to work.

On Monday night, Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer gave an interview to LCI in an effort to win support for the government's policy. Despite his personal oversight of attacks on school funding in the 2018 high school reforms and the elimination of 2,650 public school positions in 2019, he feigned concern for the toll of school closures on children's mental health.

"Keeping schools open is my deepest conviction," he said. "Being deprived of school can be very serious for children on the educational, social, psychological and even health levels." Dismissing the deaths resulting from this policy, he boasted, "France is the country that has experienced the most school days in 2020."

Blanquer stated, "I am not convinced at this stage that this solution [closing schools] could reduce the contamination." This is a bald-faced lie that contradicts international scientific studies showing that schools act as transmission vectors for the virus. Earlier on Monday, Eric Caumes, the head of infectious diseases at the Pitié-Salpêtrière hospital in Paris, stated on RMC, "It's circulating in schools, there's no reason why France should be the only country in the world where it's not circulating in schools ... there's a cost that we're going to have to pay."

Later in Blanquer's interview, he attempted to shift blame from his government's murderous "herd immunity" policy onto school children and their parents. Dismissing suggestions of extending the February vacation, he claimed that "vacations can be

more contaminating than school periods."

Yesterday, 3,041 individuals were treated for COVID-19 in hospital intensive care units in France. The figure has risen by over 1,000 in the last two days alone. This is the first time that ICU occupancy has exceeded 3,000 since November. On Monday, another 445 people died from the virus, and the seven-day average for new infections reached a two-week high of 20,447. Since the premature reopening of schools in September, over 40,000 people have died from the virus in France.

Reports indicate that the UK and South African variants may pose even greater risks to children and youth than the previously dominant strains. Last month Imperial College London virologist Wendy Barclay suggested that it may "put children on a more level playing-field." In Israel, 40 percent of positive cases of the UK variant have been amongst school age children. Last week Hadassah hospital in Jerusalem opened a pediatric COVID-19 ICU to treat "very sick" children. In an interview on Monday, a South African health care worker told LCI, "It [the South African variant] is serious. A lot of people are dying. Even children are dying now."

Both variants are present and spreading in France. A report from the National Health and Medical Research Institute last week stated that the UK variant could become "dominant" in France between the "end of February and mid-March." Variants first identified in California and Brazil, the effects of which are currently unknown, have also been detected in France. On Monday, the president of the government's scientific council, Jean-Francois Delfraissy, warned, "These variants are the equivalent of a second pandemic. And I am weighing my words."

The immediate closure of schools and all nonessential

workplaces is a question of life and death for tens of thousands. The Macron government is pursuing a policy that has caused and knows it will cause mass death. A January 22 article by RTL cited the statements of Prime Minister Jean Castex and Health Minister Olivier Véran stating that “we will not escape” being overwhelmed by the new strain of the virus. Yet the government has refused any serious measures to stop the its spread.

Blanquer’s lies are only an extension of the government’s criminal tactics to conceal the true extent of the outbreak in schools. Teachers and parents in schools throughout the country have exposed cases of schools remaining open despite outbreaks.

On January 18, a school in Oise remained open despite recording 26 positive cases following an outbreak amongst students. On January 25, a school in Roise-en-Brie received 12 positive test results but nonetheless remained open. In a farcical episode, the Jean-Zay nursery in Cherbourg-en-Contentin had its entire staff infected but was shortly reopened on January 18 with a full team of replacements. This new team immediately contracted the virus, presumably from five toddlers who later tested positive, forcing the nursery to close again.

Yesterday, the government announced that Macron, who had been due to announce some form of heightened restrictions this evening, will not speak until at least Saturday. The government’s policy runs against popular sentiment. On January 13, a BFMTV survey found that 75 percent were in favor of a new lockdown.

Despite mass anger toward Macron’s herd immunity policy and its refusal to take any meaningful measures to stem the deadly spread of the virus, the unions and “left” political parties have refused to mobilize teachers and workers against the government’s “herd immunity” policy. On Tuesday, the education unions called a one-day strike for education funding, making no mention of closing schools in response to the virus.

To prevent thousands of lives being lost to the Macron government’s policy, a mass action of teachers and the wider working class is required. Earlier this month, the UK government was forced to close schools only due to mass abstention by teachers and parents on January 4. The action took place due to the initiative of rank-and-file teachers and parents, not the union apparatuses.

Rank-and-file committees independent of the unions must be formed in every school and workplace. These would provide the basis for the organization of a general strike in France and across Europe, for the full closure of schools and nonessential workplaces. Full incomes must be provided to the entire population throughout the crisis, with small businesses adequately compensated.



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