

NPA calls to reopen French universities as COVID-19 deaths mount

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Last week the Nouveau Parti Anti-Capitaliste's (NPA) youth wing published a statement on the NPA's *Révolution Permanente* web site demanding the immediate reopening of universities. Titled "Student misery, emergency: we need funding to be able to reopen universities," the statement aligns the NPA with President Emmanuel Macron's "herd immunity" policy. It states:

"The closure of universities for several months must end. Students' perennial isolation, the lack of social life except on Zoom plunge most of us into distress. What Covid has shown is that that lack of university funding is a structural problem that thus connects the reopening of schools to the need for mass personnel hiring, requisition of new infrastructure, the installation of a coherent health plan starting with free masks and testing centers in each institution. We should not wait for directives from a government who believes that opening windows is enough to keep schools open, we should collectively work out coherent health protocols with staff, teachers and students, as many secondary schools in the Paris region did in the autumn."

The immediate consequence of what the NPA is proposing would be a surge of Covid-19 infections and deaths both among students and in the wider population. The reopening of schools in France has been a catastrophe: two-thirds of clusters occurred in schools and workplaces that Macron kept open in the autumn and winter. The result of this "herd immunity" policy, pursued across the EU, is that 200,000 Europeans contract COVID-19 each day, and 100,000 die every three weeks. Yesterday, 22,858 people contracted the virus and 513 died of it in France.

The danger, including specifically to students, is increased by the rapid spread of the more infectious B.1.1.7 (or "UK") variant. According to Santé Publique

France, 47 people under 30 have died of COVID-19 and a further 35 people in that age range are on ventilators in France. Testimony from nurses and doctors in the UK suggest that the new variant is deadlier among younger people than the previously dominant strains.

Universities have undoubtedly been starved of necessary resources over decades of austerity, but more personnel and funding will not make universities safe. Scientific studies have shown that even with proper protective equipment and social distancing, significant spread in educational settings is inevitable. Even if universities reopened with the best possible "additional measures," they would still significantly accelerate the contagion.

The NPA's claim that fighting COVID-19 means having a few more masks on hand echoes the lies of Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer. Time and again, Blanquer has denied results of scientific studies and ignored mass outbreaks, telling parents and teachers that schools are safe. Many lives have already been lost as a result. The reopening of schools and workplaces after lock-downs were ended last spring, in France and EU-wide, led to dramatic resurgence of the virus.

The NPA's attempt to justify its support for the Macron government's "herd immunity" policy by citing students' mental health reeks of cynicism and bad faith. On January 18, it published an article titled "New student suicide. The policy of the government is criminal!" This article tried to exploit the tragic suicides of two students, after results of first-semester exams were published, to justify the NPA's murderous "herd immunity" policy:

"Both of them were studying medicine, and their deaths came at the same time as the first semester exam

period, which is particularly elitist in this discipline. Effectively, increased selectiveness in recent years, and especially the economic crisis and the specter of mass unemployment have tended to intensify student unhappiness, as one sees from student distress expressed since the exams in January after the end of the holidays.”

The NPA concluded that “it is crucial to reopen the universities to end the enforced isolation of students.” Because the Macron government has imposed distance learning in the universities, the NPA asserted, “the government has blood on its hands.”

The government has blood on its hands, but not because of the few limited social distancing measures it has adopted. It is because Macron ended the spring lock-down prematurely and without preparing proper contract tracing, and then pursued an EU “herd immunity” policy. This has led to over 75,000 deaths in France, and 700,000 in Europe. While scientists and doctors tried to halt the pandemic by adopting stronger social distancing, Macron’s “herd immunity” policy could rely on the support of the NPA—which also has blood on its hands.

Relieving student stress and preventing suicides requires first and foremost ending the pandemic. This will eliminate students’ fears they will contract and die of COVID-19 and, by ending the current economic recession caused by the pandemic, make more jobs available to graduates. However, this requires first of all ending the murderous “herd immunity” policy advocated by both Macron and the NPA, which only spreads and prolongs the pandemic.

The fight to halt the pandemic requires the political mobilization of the working class and the youth in France, and across Europe and internationally. Independent committees of rank-and-file workers in workplaces, and students and staff in universities, are necessary to oversee security and fight for a scientifically-guided lock-down policy. However, for such bodies to be effective, they must be organized in opposition not only to capitalist governments like that of Macron, but to petty-bourgeois supporters of “herd immunity” like the NPA and the union bureaucracies.

Obtaining the resources to properly fund a safe lock-down, with every member of society receiving a full living wage, halt a post-lock-down resurgence of the virus, and rebuild the economy requires a revolutionary

and socialist struggle to expropriate the financial aristocracy. The French and European ruling class has gorged itself on trillions of euros in public funds given to them by EU and European Central Bank bailouts. As 700,000 people died across Europe and tens of millions fell into poverty, the wealth of Europe’s billionaires skyrocketed.

Affluent petty-bourgeois layers of the union bureaucracy, academia and middle class professionals which the NPA represents stood to gain, however, from these bailouts. The CGT, CFTD, FO, CFTC, and UNSA union confederations issued a statement to “expressly welcome” the EU bailouts designed by Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel in May 2020. Indeed, they no doubt received their share of the billions of euros in bailout funding pouring through the coffers of corporate management and works council offices.

This underlies both the NPA’s support for “herd immunity” and its malign indifference to workers struggles against Macron’s pandemic policy. Indeed, the unions isolated teachers’ wildcat strikes in November, which were violently attacked by Macron’s riot police.

The course of the pandemic has vindicated the warnings of the *Parti de l’égalité socialiste* on the necessity of determined, scientifically-guided lock-down and social distancing measures, and on the petty-bourgeois and reactionary character of the NPA. The PES appeals to workers, students and youth in struggle to end the nightmare of the pandemic to support it against the NPA and its “herd immunity” policies.



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