French teachers denounce Macron government's "herd immunity" policy in schools

Will Morrow
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There is widespread and growing opposition among educators in France to the Macron government's policy of permitting the coronavirus to spread unhindered through schools among teachers, students, and their families.

Last night, Prime Minister Jean Castex delivered a press conference to announce that the government was continuing to reject any lock-down measures. The seven-day rolling average for daily cases is over 20,000, and for daily deaths, 427. More than 64 percent of emergency care beds nationally are occupied, with 3,277 coronavirus patients now in intensive care units. Yet Castex declared that the "situation does not justify" a lock-down.

His statements directly contradict the warnings of scientists and medical professionals, who have denounced Macron's announcement last week rejecting a national lock-down. Macron is openly pursuing a policy of allowing the virus to spread in order to prevent any impact of a lock-down on the profits of French corporations. The *Journal de Dimanche* cited Geoffrey Roux de Bézieux, the head of the national employers' association, confirming that it was in continuous exchange with the government, and that "businessmen would be indignant at the return of a solution identical to that of March," when a full lock-down was implemented.

The school system is the sharpest point of the policy of sacrificing lives for profits. The French government has boasted that it has kept schools open throughout the pandemic for more days than any other country. As across Europe and in the US, children and teachers are being herded into classrooms so that their parents can be forced into workplaces.

Among teachers and students internationally, however, opposition to this policy is growing. In Chicago, over 20,000 educators voted to reject the resumption of in-person classes demanded by the Democratic mayor and the Biden administration. Educators in the UK forced the closure of schools in January.

French teachers who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* described non-existent social-distancing measures, being kept in the dark as their students contract the virus, and a systematic policy of keeping schools in classrooms even as cases are confirmed.

Stéphanie, who has taught for 21 years and currently teachers second-year primary school, told the WSWS she was "more than upset by the current situation. Today my school learned that a student tested positive for the virus. This student ate in the canteen (therefore without a mask), and no one is considered as a contact case. In my own class I have had students with the virus. One stayed home for a week, returned without any explanation, and no one was considered a contact case because everyone wears a mask. You can imagine how seven-year-olds wear a mask."

The social-distancing policy is "that we open the window," she said. "The rules for contact tracing are different at school than elsewhere: There is [supposedly] never any contact in schools. No social distancing because we have all the students there."

The government's policy "is that the schools must absolutely remain open to protect the economy while putting the workers directly in danger."

Emmeline, an English teacher with three years' experience as a substitute teacher in middle and high school, described similar conditions.

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“There is no social distancing at my school. I have six classes in total and I have up to 33 students per class… A lot of the students don’t wear their masks properly or the mask is too big for them so it just slips off their face all day long. One was coughing and sneezing in class today and pulled his mask down each time so there’s bound to be sick children in that class in the days to come. Several of my students have had Covid but recovered from it. Tons of kids at my school have had it but the school hasn’t been closed despite all the contaminations.”

She said she thought schools needed to be closed and online learning organized, with large investments in resources for both students, parents and teachers in order to facilitate this. “The government needs to start investing in real solutions,” she said. “What happened during the first lockdown was just an absolute joke: we had nothing to work with. Just our books, our computers, our wifi, our mobile phones… it was absolutely terrible. I honestly think that if they have the correct online resources per class/per level, we’d be able to do online teaching and it would be a heck of a lot easier for everyone. No commuting, no overcrowded classrooms, not having to wear the mask and potentially contaminate your classmates.”

“I really feel like we’re the ‘sacrificed’ ones,” she added. She said she had not previously heard about the ongoing struggle by Chicago teachers against the school openings, but supported it. “Wow, I didn’t know [about it]! Good for them!” She added that she thought there should be a united struggle by teachers in Europe and the United States. “I completely agree with it,” she said. “I’m beyond tired of being exploited… It’s like we’re not important. Underpaid, invisible: just go to work and shut up.”

Claire, a middle-school teacher with 17 years’ experience, said that the government is protecting “the large fortunes and shareholders,” which is why schools are kept open. “The worst is that they camouflage it all by saying that closing schools would be a disaster for the children.”

“I think the children are being put in danger, but the education ministry has insisted since the beginning that the school setting is safe and that children are not contagious… In October, we had a dozen confirmed cases but some parents with the virus have continued to send their children to school, and other students have never been tested. For the last three weeks, we have had cases. In October, 5 teachers were contaminated, two of them definitely at school.”

The Macron government has only been able to keep schools open because of the complete support it has received from the trade unions for its criminal policy. The national education unions call for keeping schools open. They maintain the Macron government’s lying claim that it would be impossible to organize effective at-distance learning, and that teachers must therefore continue to keep schools open.

In November, strikes broke out at dozens of schools across the country. The unions responded by calling a one-day “warning strike,” which they made clear was not aimed at closing schools, but to let off steam and smother demands for the closure of schools.

If a struggle is to be organized against the Macron government’s policy of herd immunity, it must be organized by educators and students themselves. Educators should form their own action committees at schools, independent of the trade union apparatuses, and reach out to other teachers online in France and across Europe. This would provide the means for the preparation of a European-wide strike to enforce the closure of schools and non-essential workplaces, so that the vaccine can be safely administered to the population. Vast resources must be expended to provide all the required resources to students and teachers for remote learning, and to provide an income to parents to remain home and care for their children.

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