

French government rejects lockdown as UK variant becomes dominant strain

Samuel Tissot
26 February 2021

In a joint televised address on Thursday evening, French Prime Minister Jean Castex and Health Minister Olivier Véran admitted that more recent and more contagious variants now make up the majority of cases in France. Nonetheless, Castex rejected calls by scientists for a nationwide lockdown, declaring that “we have to push it back as far as we can.”

Citing Wednesday’s figures of over 32,500 new infections, Castex admitted that this was “a figure we haven’t seen since November.” The virus “has been gaining ground again in the last week,” he stated.

The recent spike in infections has been primarily driven by the spread of the more infectious and more deadly variants. Health Minister Olivier Véran revealed that in the last week, the UK variant accounted for nearly half of the cases throughout the country. He added that a “further five to six” percent of new infections were cases of the Brazilian and South African variants.

The spread of these variants will worsen an already catastrophic situation in France. Early this week France surpassed 85,000 deaths since the beginning of the pandemic, including over 20,000 since January 1. The seven-day average for daily deaths is 313 and more than 20,000 for new cases. France’s positive test percentage is nearly seven percent, suggesting that the true number of cases is much larger.

Directly contradicting scientists and the majority of the French population who support new lockdown measures, Castex went on to claim, “Some people are calling for strict containment, to get rid of COVID-19 once and for all. This is not possible, given the nature of the variants.”

Such statements do not reflect scientific reality but the interests of the superrich. The virus can be controlled and eventually eliminated internationally on

the basis of careful scientific management. A lockdown would dramatically bring down the number of cases and prevent tens of thousands of deaths while vaccines are distributed throughout the population. An effective test and trace system would be able to prevent mass outbreaks.

In reality, the Macron government neglects these measures because they cut into the flow of corporate profits into the pockets of the superrich. This is why all schools and all non-essential workplaces must remain open, despite being massive vectors for the spread of the disease. As far as Castex, Véran and Macron are concerned, if thousands of individuals’ lives are cut short as a result of this policy, then so be it.

In response to the increased spread of the variants, Castex only announced the “reinforced surveillance” of 20 departments, including the capital region of Ile-de-France. Each day of this wait-and-see approach will result in hundreds if not thousands of preventable deaths. He hinted that a new partial lockdown may be ordered, which would involve the maintenance of open schools and non-essential workplaces, as was the case in November.

This is only the latest in a set of ineffectual measures implemented by the government since the new year. This includes the nationwide 6:00 p.m. curfew and non-EU travel ban introduced after the variants were already well established in the country. Dunkirk and Nice have been placed under weekend lockdowns that will start March 6.

Crucially, however, schools and non-essential workplaces have been left open throughout the week.

Since the end of the pseudo-lockdown in November, the Macron government has steadily shed any pretense of fighting the virus. In October, he insisted that the population needed to learn to “live with the virus.”

Following comments from Jean-Francois Delfraissy, the head of the government's scientific council, calling for a new lockdown in January, Macron denounced the "interventions of scientists" and "incessant tracking of errors" in the government's handling of COVID-19.

While refusing to take the steps necessary to combat the virus, Véran used the public address to promote further illusions in the government's faltering vaccination campaign. He stated, "We will see the end of this epidemic. The progress of the vaccination campaign allows us to set a course for the end of spring."

In fact, France's vaccination campaign has been a debacle. So far only five percent of adults have received their first dose. Earlier on Thursday, UK-based vaccine producer AstraZeneca confirmed it would only be able to provide 50 percent of its second-quarter dose quota to the EU, threatening to reignite nationalist tensions with the Johnson government over vaccine access.

Workers must reject this murderous policy and demand an immediate full lockdown! Schools and non-essential workplaces must be closed. A comfortable living income must be provided to everyone in the population throughout a lockdown, including access to housing, food and other essential services. Full compensation must be provided to small businesses.

The strict March lockdown was only implemented by governments across Europe following a wave of wildcat strikes beginning in Italy and Spain. This experience underlines the fact that the only way that thousands of lives can be saved is through the mobilization of the working class in a general strike against the herd immunity policy of capitalist governments. The answer to the capitalist elite's policy of mass death is the expropriation of the financial elite and the reorganization of society's wealth in order to meet social need.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact