

As coronavirus cases explode, French teachers demand closure of schools

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While the number of coronavirus cases is rising rapidly in France, and the health care system risks being completely overwhelmed, there is a growing movement among teachers for the closure of schools and the adoption of a lockdown policy opposed by the Macron government.

Yesterday, more than 30,000 coronavirus cases were reported across France. The seven-day average for cases is now 33,500, but is rising rapidly. For three days last week, the number of reported cases was between 40,000-45,000. On average, almost 300 people die every day.

There is every indication however that the death toll is on the verge of a major increase. The hospital system is already at a critical point. Yesterday, the total number of patients in intensive care surpassed 5,000, eclipsing for the first time the peak set during the second wave in November last year.

In the Ile-de-France region around Paris, the number of patients in intensive care units is 1,484. Yesterday, however, the Public Assistance of Paris Hospitals (AP-HP) warned that, based on the accelerating hospitalisation rate, even assuming a strict lockdown is imposed beginning April 1, the number of ICU patients will more than double to 3,470 in the Paris area within three weeks. If the government waits an additional week to order a lockdown, this would rise to 4,466 by April 29.

In an interview last week with the *Journal du Dimanche*, President Macron defended his government's refusal to impose a lockdown to prevent the spread of the virus. Behind the homicidal policy of allowing the virus to spread through the population stand the interests of the French financial elite, which rejects any restriction on non-essential production or schools that would threaten the flow of corporate

profits. Faced with a wave of denunciations by scientists and doctors, Macron is due to deliver a national televised address this evening.

The sharp edge of Macron's "herd immunity" policy has been the policy of open schools. Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer boasts continuously that France has kept schools open longer than any other country in Europe throughout the pandemic. In truth, schools are being used as child-minding services so that parents can be kept at work.

This has now produced a catastrophe. An unknown number of friends and family members of teachers and students have died due to Macron's policy. Its impact is systematically covered up by the lack of official data on deaths attributable to cases occurring in schools.

The case of the Eugène Delacroix high school in Seine Saint-Denis, the working class suburb north of Paris, is a horrific demonstration of the homicidal character of French policy. Between the beginning of the pandemic and December last year, 20 parents of students died from coronavirus. The spread of the virus in the school is continuing. Since the beginning of the month, almost 60 students and 20 teachers have contracted the virus.

The staff at the school have gone on strike to close the school, exercising their right protected under French law to refuse to work under conditions placing their life in danger. On Friday, the staff addressed an open letter to President Macron, denouncing an "alarming health care situation." They state: "We demand the urgent and temporary closure of the school, with a complete transition to online teaching in order to ensure continuity of learning."

Other schools are also being either fully or partially closed by strike action by teachers. At the Blaise-Cendrars in Sevran, also in the Seine-Saint Denis

region, 20 teachers have refused to work.

Opposition among teachers is mounting rapidly as the number of infections in schools is exploding throughout the country.

Throughout the month of March, the number of classes closed jumped from week to week because more than three coronavirus cases had been detected within the same class. On Friday, March 26, the education ministry revealed that 3,256 classes were closed, up by 1,238 within the space of a week, a rise of 60 percent.

The highest concentration of closed classes is in the Academy of Créteil, which encompasses Seine-Saint Denis, Seine-et-Marne and Val-de-Marne. More than 536 classes have been closed in these areas alone. In the Academy of Lyon, 177 classes were closed last week, up from 24 the week before, a rise of 640 percent.

On Friday, Blanquer announced a change in the health protocol, ordering a class to close upon the detection of a single case, rather than three, as previously.

This is an acknowledgement that the government's policy has contributed to a massive spread of the virus among youth. Yet the government is determined to keep schools open as long as possible.

Blanquer stated that he was opposed to bringing forward the beginning of holidays in April, absurdly claiming that "it has not been demonstrated that the holiday period," i.e., with schools closed, "lead to fewer contaminations than during the school period."

On Monday, a group of 56 educators as part of the Stylos Rouges collective filed a suit against Blanquer, accusing him of "not protecting staff in contacting with children," who "are spreading the virus."

The Macron government is widely accused of covering up the true extent of cases in schools. There is a continuous disparity between the official number of student coronavirus infections with those of school-aged children. On March 26, for example, the education system counted 21,183 positive cases from pre-school to high school in a week. However, Public Health France reported 57,000 cases among those aged under 20, with approximately 80 percent of these cases (or 45,600) estimated to be minors aged under 18.

To enforce its homicidal policy of keeping schools open, however, the Macron government has depended

entirely upon the complicity and active support of the education trade unions. These unions helped organize the school opening policy with Macron, opposing calls for closure of schools and a transition to online learning. Even amid the explosion of cases in schools and widespread demands among teachers for their closure, the National High School Teachers Union (SNES-FSU) is continuing to demand only a reduction of class numbers in half.

In November, strikes broke out organised by teachers in schools across the country to oppose the reopening of classes after the holiday break amid a surge in cases. The national union federations, including the Stalinist General Federation of Labour (CGT), intervened to shut down the strike action and oppose calls for the extension of the strike and closure of schools.

Against this policy, teachers should form their own independent rank-and-file safety committees in every school. These would provide a basis for organising a nationwide strike to enforce the closure of schools. An appeal must be made for the development of European-wide strike action to impose a lockdown across the continent. Families must be provided with a comfortable income so that a parent can remain at home with their child and all non-essential production must be stopped.



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