

With 30,000 daily COVID-19 cases, Macron reopens French schools

Will Morrow, Jacques Valentin
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In a press conference last night, French Prime Minister Jean Castex confirmed that despite the more than 30,000 daily coronavirus cases in the country, the Macron government is proceeding with its plans to end the limited lockdown measures and reopen schools beginning this Monday.

All primary schools will reopen on Monday, as was originally announced by Macron at the end of March. They were closed for a single week before the two-week school holiday break. Middle schools and high schools are to return to school the following week, on May 3, with high school classes being organized on alternating schedules, with classrooms reduced to half the size.

In addition, the 10-kilometer restriction on travel away from home is being removed. Castex stated that the government is maintaining its projected timeline to reopen outdoor dining and cafes, cultural and sporting venues and certain stores in the “middle of May,” though this would be confirmed and subject to development of “the health situation.” He added that this may be implemented on a nationwide or region-by-region basis.

Castex announced this reopening policy even while admitting that the “number of daily cases remains slightly more than 30,000.” In comparison, when the Macron government ended the stricter lockdown in May 2020, which had involved the closure of schools and many non-essential workplaces over eight weeks, there were between less than a hundred and several hundred cases per day—or roughly 0.5 percent of the current levels. The government had claimed that its threshold for reimposing a lockdown was then 5,000 cases per day.

In the period since, the health situation has become more dangerous, with the dominance of a more

contagious variant, B.1.1.7, which now makes up almost all cases in France. Both Tuesday and Wednesday, there were more than 34,000 cases in France. On April 20, there were over 44,000 cases. The seven-day average of daily deaths remains at 300. Macron’s pursuit of a reopening of schools guarantees that the number of cases will continue to grow and that large numbers of people will die unnecessarily.

Three and a half weeks since the announcement by Macron of limited lockdown measures, the outcome has been a disaster. The seven-day average of new cases is 32,274, a decrease of only two percent from the week before. Approximately 31,000 people remain hospitalized. The number of people in intensive care units is close to 6,000.

The milestone of 100,000 deaths of coronavirus was passed on April 15. The number of daily deaths has never dropped below 250 since October 20. Mass death is the official policy of the Macron government in the face of the pandemic.

The rate of reproduction of the virus, or the *r*-rate, had fallen below 0.7 even during the limited lockdown of November 2020. Only in recent days has it fallen below 1 nationally. Even in the regional departments which are officially considered to be less at-risk, the *r*-rate is in some cases above 1, meaning that the virus is spreading exponentially.

Castex’s speech followed by just a day the Italian government’s formal approval of a decree codifying last Friday’s announcement by Prime Minister Draghi for a partial end to lockdown measures. Italian schools are to completely reopen beginning Monday, along with outdoor dining and cafes, museums and swimming pools. The current daily death rate in Italy is more than 300.

On a global scale, the coronavirus is developing into

a new and more dangerous phase. The seven-day average of daily cases is at its highest level on record. In many countries in eastern Europe, Brazil, India, Brazil and elsewhere, the number of cases and deaths has reached new levels. Under these conditions, governments across Europe are abandoning the pretense of maintaining lockdown measures to fight against the spread of the virus and declaring that the reopening must continue regardless.

The motivation for this policy lies in the interests of the European capitalist class and its demand that non-essential industry must continue so that corporate profits can continue to grow. Schools are being kept open so that parents can be kept at work. This was the meaning of Macron's statement at the end of March that it was necessary to consider the impact of further lockdowns on "the economy."

Thus, on April 6, Macron reaffirmed his perspective for the reopening of schools as scheduled, regardless of the development of the health situation. "It is essential that we resume in-person classes for the kindergarten and primary schools on April 26, and for middle and high schools the following week. I have not conditioned the reopening of the kindergartens, primary, middle or high schools on any health indicators."

Yet to the extent that cases were reduced over the last two-and-a-half weeks, the major contributing factor was the closure of schools for three weeks, due to the two-week holiday period. Now even this is being ended. The reopening of schools is being carried out with the active support of the trade unions, which support the policy of ensuring parents can remain at work.

The actual number of daily cases is likely significantly higher than the official total. According to the John Hopkins Institute, the number of daily tests in France dropped significantly, from 7.92 per thousand people on April 3 to 5.09 on April 16, likely due to a fall-off in testing during the holiday period.



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