Schools reopen in France and Italy amid continuing spread of coronavirus

Will Morrow
26 April 2021

Schools reopened yesterday across France and Italy, even as tens of thousands of cases continued to be reported each day, and the hospital system remains strained by near-record numbers of patients in intensive care.

In France, primary schools returned, while middle and high schools are due to return in one week, on May 3. In Italy, schools reopened for in-person teaching at all grade levels. The decision to proceed with the reopening is a criminal action taken in the profit interests of French and Italian corporations in order to prevent a prolonged restriction on business operations caused by the closure of schools.

French President Emmanuel Macron had announced the school closures in a televised address on March 31. He did not explain why the government was taking this action, given that its official policy has been that schools do not contribute significantly to the spread of the coronavirus. Primary schools were closed for just a single week before the two-week holiday break, with an additional week of online learning for middle and high school students.

On April 6, Macron declared that the government was committed to maintaining this schedule, regardless of how many people fell ill or died. “It is essential that we resume in-person classes” as scheduled, he said. “I have not conditioned the reopening of the kindergartens, primary, middle or high schools on any health indicators.” In other words, the school reopenings are not conditioned by “health indicators,” as would be a precondition for any scientific policy, but by the defense of the profits of the French capitalist class.

On March 31, at the time of Macron’s speech, the seven-day average of daily cases stood at 37,997. Yet today, as schools reopened, it remained at almost 30,000, a level that, before March 18, had not been surpassed since November last year. In contrast, when schools were reopened last year following stricter lockdowns, the number of daily cases numbered in the hundreds.

Moreover, the number of people hospitalized stands at 30,287 and has remained virtually unchanged since the end of last month. The number of people in intensive care units is actually higher than at the end of March at just over 6,000, a level that had not been surpassed since the peak of the first wave last year. The positive test rate nationally, averaged over seven days, has increased since the end of March from 7.67 percent to 9.62 percent.

To the extent that there has been a reduction in cases over the previous three weeks, it is mainly due to the impact of the school closures and the holiday break. Now even this measure is being abandoned.

The Élysée is also preparing to announce a further lifting of lockdown restrictions in the middle of May, including potentially the reopening of outdoor dining. The government is due to make an announcement on this in the coming days.

In Italy, outdoor dining has already been reopened today, along with swimming pools, museums and other cultural centers. Prime Minister Draghi stated that it was necessary to carry out a reopening and take a “calculated risk” that it would lead to a renewed upsurge of the virus.

On Sunday, Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer spoke on the “Grand Jury” program of Radio France Internationale. “It is essential to get the students back to school,” he said. “I have said it for more than a year. … We have to take into account all the different parameters. Of course, there is the coronavirus. But there are other things as well.”

© World Socialist Web Site

Blanquer said he would prefer to have one percent of classes closed due to coronavirus infections among students and teachers than to have all schools closed. In the last week of March, the government modified its school protocol so that classrooms would close after a single confirmed case, rather than three as previously, in an acknowledgment that the virus was spreading largely unimpeded throughout the education system. More than 11,200 classes were closed from March 29 to April 2, three times as many as the week before.

Asked whether the government's position was that the reopening of schools would not lead to a significant increase in the spread of the virus, he answered that "school is not the place where we should concentrate all our attention. … That means that school is not responsible for the pandemic. It represents only a small portion." The government's own statistical health agency reports a major fall in the number of cases among youth since the closure of schools: by 19 percent among those aged 6-10, by 23 percent among those aged 11-14, and by 19 percent among those aged 15-17.

The surge among students is also being accelerated by the presence of more contagious variants of the virus. The British variant is responsible for almost all cases in France. On Saturday, Prime Minister Jean Castex attempted to dismiss the danger of the spread of the Brazilian variant, claiming that "the variants are not numerous and have a tendency to decline." The data published by Public Health France shows instead that the Brazilian variant now makes up 4.8 percent of all cases.

The Macron government's school reopening policy is so brazenly dictated by naked class interests and so antiscientific that it would be impossible to pursue it were it not for the active support from the trade unions. The national education unions have collaborated with Macron in enforcing the reopening of schools throughout the year. France has kept schools open longer than any other country in Europe. According to UNESCO, from March 2020 to March 2021, France had only 10 weeks of school closures, compared to 28 in Germany.

In response to yesterday's reopening, the unions have maintained their policy of offering helpful criticisms of the most egregious absences of protective measures in schools, while opposing any action to close schools and proposing no action even to enforce safer conditions.

The FSU-SNES education union published a statement yesterday, denouncing the government mainly for "holding few discussions with the unions which, once again, discover the principal measures of the reopening via the media. This causes great confusion while the information arrives very late. From the day after the school closures, the FSU had urged that the return to in-person classes be anticipated."

This underscores that if action is to be taken to oppose the Macron government's policy of allowing the virus to spread throughout the schools, it must be taken by educators and students themselves. Schools must be closed, with vast resources made available for online learning, including the provision of high-speed internet and computer access for every child; and parents must be provided with pay in order to be able to remain at home. Nonessential work must be stopped, with workers and small businesses fully compensated.

The development of such a struggle requires the formation of independent organizations of struggle in schools and workplaces—rank-and-file workplace committees, controlled by workers themselves and independent of the trade union apparatuses.

This Saturday, May 1, the *World Socialist Web Site* is hosting an International Online May Day Rally which will launch the call for the development of an International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, to provide a basis for the working class to launch its own international counteroffensive against the homicidal policies of the capitalist class. We urge all educators and students to register for the rally and make plans to attend.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site