

Reopening of French schools threatens children's lives

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Amid the surge of the Delta variant in France, the Macron government plans in less than two weeks to crowd millions of children back into schools. Starting on September 2, millions of French students will return to lecture halls and student canteens, regardless of their vaccination status.

As in the September 2020 school reopening in France (when daily cases averaged just 5,407), this will lead to a new surge of COVID-19 cases and the propagation of new variants in a population where only 56 percent are fully vaccinated. Daily cases in France have averaged 23,279 over the last seven days. The 145 deaths recorded on August 17 was the highest total since May.

Despite widespread anti-scientific claims by the capitalist media that the virus isn't dangerous for the young, as of July 2021, at least 16 school-aged children had died from COVID-19 in French hospitals. University-age students have also suffered severely throughout the pandemic. In the 20-29 age group, there have been 81 recorded COVID-19 deaths in hospitals. These deaths occurred before the propagation of the Delta variant, which now accounts for over 90 percent of France's cases and is much more deadly and damaging for children and youth.

Furthermore, the Delta variant is more infectious, deadly, and extremely dangerous for children. Its spread has been associated with record child hospitalizations and deaths in India, the United States and Indonesia. Since the beginning of July, over 100 child deaths every week have been recorded each week by the Indonesian Pediatric Society. This August, at least four children have died in the United States from COVID-19 following infection at school.

As in the United States, the reopening of French schools, even as tens of thousands of infections are recorded daily, will accelerate the spread of the virus

and lead to more tragic, preventable deaths.

In late July, French Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer unveiled a four-tiered plan that amounted to a commitment to avoid suspending in-person education, no matter the human cost. The green, amber, orange, and red levels are a hodgepodge of partial measures, including mask-wearing, group mixing and the cancellation of certain sports. In the context of mass community transmission these rules will not be enough to protect children, teachers or families.

Only at orange and red level is there any return to online education. In a "red" alert level, 15- and 16-year-olds will have hybrid classes at 50 percent capacity and *lycée* (high school) students will also have hybrid classes. Though vaccinated individuals can infect others with the virus, if a secondary school class member tests positive, then only those unvaccinated students will be sent home. Primary school classes will continue with in-person education, regardless of alert levels.

Part of the government's plans to ensure in-person education continues is the vaccination of 12- to 18-year-olds, if parental permission is granted. At the end of September, the vaccine passport for social and cultural events will also be extended to all adolescents over age 12, although it will not apply to schools. Blanquer also said that 600,000 tests will be performed a week. However, since over 12.4 million children and 821,000 teachers attend schools in France, this will be nowhere near sufficient to prevent major outbreaks.

Moreover, the alert level is arbitrarily set by the government, meaning that the implementation of these limited rules will be made in line with the level of death the government thinks it can get away with, rather than any objective scientific criteria. The deadly implications of this can already be seen on the French

island of Réunion in the Indian Ocean. Despite a record 3,590 cases last week, the equivalent of nearly 275,000 weekly cases in mainland France's population, 220,000 school children returned to classrooms there last Monday.

The Macron government's plan has nothing to do with defending children's health or education, but seeks to reduce disruption to profit extraction from working families as much as possible. Only children old enough to stay at home while their parents go to work are to receive online education. Regardless of how many are dying, children too young to stay at home without parental supervision and who are totally unprotected against the virus are to be forced to stay in school.

Ruling circles are well aware of the danger posed by variants to children and the potential for a wave of children's deaths and serious illnesses provoking explosive outrage among workers. Last month, High Commissioner for Planning, François Bayrou said: "I live with a fear of this virus, that one day a mutation will make the virus extremely harmful to children. ... If it affected children, especially young children, then I think we would be faced with waves that would call into question the very stability of society."

Yet this is precisely the scenario that the government's own policy is setting into motion. The coronavirus, and particularly its delta variant, is a deadly virus capable of causing severe disease and death in all layers of the population. As it rips through the body, even in non-fatal cases, it causes severe inflammation of vital organs, including the brain and heart.

Allowing mass infection of children could not only cause deaths and a surge of infections in the coming weeks and months, but plague entire generations with life-long consequences. Even less potent variants have left many in these age groups plagued by the effects of Long COVID, including the devastating impact of COVID-19 infection on cognitive development.

The Macron government knows this very well, but it is preparing a mass slaughter and long-term damage to the young—yet again accepting mass infection and death to protect corporate profits.

Macron's "herd immunity" policy has been supported by the union bureaucracies and pseudo-left parties during the pandemic. Nowhere has this been

more explicit than their support for the government's deadly policy of keeping schools open no matter the cost. The Stalinist General Confederation of Labour (CGT) and the Unitary Union Federation (FSU) have explicitly backed reopening schools since the summer of 2020—isolating teachers and students striking against a return to in-person learning last year, even as Macron's policemen violently attacked them.

Moreover, pseudo-left groups like the Morenoite *Révolution Permanente* have anti-scientifically insisted that schools can be reopened safely by marginally changing security protocols, while denouncing health measures necessary to contain the deadly virus as "authoritarian."

This treachery even allowed Blanquer to boast that France has kept its children in school longer than any other European nation. It is impossible to negotiate with the murderous representatives of the ruling class or to appeal to them to see sense. A movement must be built to oppose them.

Under conditions of the rapid spread of the Delta variant internationally, Macron's deadly school opening must be opposed. Teachers and parents must prepare mass strike action independently of the corrupt unions, coordinated with teachers and workers across Europe and beyond. They must demand the suspension of in-person schooling, all non-essential production, and a policy of social isolation with full compensation until the virus is brought under control and the population is fully vaccinated.



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