

Reopening of French schools threatens students and workers with a resurgence of the pandemic

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With an average of over 13,000 daily cases, the reopening of schools in France that began last week is preparing a new wave of infections, illnesses and deaths among teachers, children and the population at large.

In the face of this criminal policy, workers and teachers must fight for a strategy to eradicate the virus, based on the measures proposed by epidemiologists, virologists and other scientists throughout the pandemic. This means the international application of all the measures available in the fight against the virus, including lockdowns and social distancing measures. The implementation of this strategy requires the development of a powerful international and unified working-class mass movement based on science.

Millions of children and students returned to school and universities on September 2. Youth aged under 12 are not vaccinated, and those aged under 18 are on average the least vaccinated. In September 2020, France counted an average of 5,407 new daily cases, which prepared a new epidemic wave and the spread of new variants. Now the health situation is worse, due to the aggressiveness of the Delta variant.

Questioned on news channel BFMTV, Health Minister Olivier Véran said: “We must be extremely vigilant, and I ask the French people who are watching this to be very careful in the days and weeks to come, to respect social distancing measures, to wear the mask wherever necessary, to wash your hands; all of that you know.”

On the same channel, Lila Bouadma, a health worker at the Bichat Hospital in Paris and member of the Scientific Council, estimated that in the coming days, “there will be 50,000 children infected per day, which

is colossal. We can fear that there will be a return of a paediatric epidemic. We are not prepared for that, because it is specialty care. For children, we think that it is not more serious, but we must change the paradigm; this does not matter. Some have long forms of COVID, they are not very symptomatic but they remain so, with a significant state of fatigue.”

The epidemiologist Arnaud Fontanet warned on *France Inter*: “The schools are the most complex situation that awaits us this fall. We cannot apply the same recipes as before.”

The reopening of schools in the United States confirms these warnings in France. In the second week of August, more than 121,000 children tested positive for the virus and a record number, more than 1,900, were hospitalized in the US alone. These numbers are expected to skyrocket in the coming weeks with the full reopening of schools.

Already in the initial days of the opening, teachers have posted statements on social media warning of the lack of preparation, the absence of resources, and no means to impose even limited social distancing measures.

One teacher, Marie, posted an image on the Red Pens Facebook group showing her windows almost sealed shut, with the caption: “Here are the windows of my classroom in their maximum open position. The two other walls have no windows. There are two doors but they open into another classroom and a hallway. ... A CO2 captor would not be a luxury...”

Wrongly presented as a disease of the elderly, the virus is increasingly infecting young adults and unvaccinated children. *Le Monde* reports, “As of August 23, nineteen children and adolescents aged 0 to

19 were hospitalized in Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur, exceeding the thresholds reached during the third wave. These figures are linked to the record levels of contaminations in these territories during the holiday season.”

Faced with this alarming situation, the Education Minister Michel Blanquer announced on August 29 that the return to school would take place under a Level 2 health protocol, that is to say, face-to-face instruction with all students. As soon as the first case is detected in middle and high schools, there will not be any shutting of classes, and vaccinated students are to continue attending class. Only in primary school and kindergarten are classes to close for seven days after the first case is detected.

Non-vaccinated students who are contact cases will have to isolate for seven days. In Guadeloupe and Polynesia, where lockdowns have been implemented, the start of the school year has been postponed by two weeks.

The maintenance of the start of the school year accompanied by limited health measures, despite the alarming warnings of epidemiologists, underscores the criminal policy of the Macron government. The limited measures will not prevent the circulation of the virus among children and teachers as well as parents, encouraging the development of new and potentially more dangerous variants.

The policy of “herd immunity” has already caused more than 110,000 deaths in France and more than one million in Europe. Macron will be responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of people in the coming months, including children, as well as the long-term impact of Long COVID from which many children will suffer.

This criminal policy would not have been possible without the complicity of the trade union apparatuses. The reopening of the schools is part of the “herd immunity” policy of the financial aristocracy. Having flooded the financial markets with liquidity and implemented bailout packages for itself, the financial elite is imposing the return to work, which would be impossible without the reopening of schools. The aim is to make massive profits on the backs of workers and their families, who are in mortal danger.

Not only did the trade unions refuse to fight to keep workers safe since the beginning of the pandemic. The

CGT and CFDT, like the German trade unions, applauded the EU bailout packages and participated in the negotiations to restructure the European economy throughout the pandemic. They helped the state and employers to impose on worried teachers and parents the dangerous reopening of classes for children.

The Minister of Education negotiated and agreed with the unions upon the implementation of the reopening of in-person classes. The unions have since participated in protests against the health pass organized by the extreme right, demanding the lifting of health restrictions for the implementation of a policy of “herd immunity” without mitigation.

The struggle to eradicate the virus can only be led by an independent political struggle of the workers, breaking with the trade unions and the pseudo-left political tendencies. Only a working-class movement, which is not motivated by the pursuit of profit or of personal wealth, is capable of imposing a scientific policy to eradicate the virus.

Last year, it was the workers in Italy and other countries who downed their tools spontaneously in wildcat actions to protect themselves from the pandemic, forcing governments to institute lockdowns out of fear of a social explosion.

The strategy for eradicating the virus requires shutting down nonessential production and closing schools, as well as universal testing, contact tracing and isolation of those who are infected. These measures must be combined with full income support for workers and small business owners affected by the shutdowns, as well as a massive infusion of resources to provide high quality distance education for all children.

This initiative must be developed as part of an integrated global movement of the entire working class, through the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).



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