French universities reopen for in-person learning amid COVID-19 pandemic

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As of the beginning of this week, French universities have fully reopened for in-person learning without basic protections against COVID-19 for students and staff. The only restriction in place is the mandatory wearing face masks, which are less effective against the dominant Delta variant.

The staggered reopening of universities has unfolded over the past few weeks. Many students entering university education for the first time took part in orientation activities with no restrictions. Sports clubs, drinking events, and other activities involving large group gatherings have resumed as if the pandemic did not exist. In a direct parallel of last year's deadly reopening, students are daily confronted with overcrowded lecture halls and packed cafeterias.

Huge numbers of students and the wider population remain unprotected in France. Contrary to the myth promoted by the bourgeois media and Macron government, students and young people also die from COVID-19. Since the beginning of the pandemic, 91 people between the ages of 20 and 29 have died from COVID-19, including 10 since the beginning of August.

Many students also remain unvaccinated. One in four people in France between the ages of 18 and 39 are not fully vaccinated, according to figures published by *l'Assurance Malady* on September 12. Proof of vaccination is not currently required to enter universities. Furthermore, increasingly vaccine-resistant variants will proliferate as long as the virus is not eradicated.

As was the case last year, the entire reopening of universities has been subordinated to the Macron government's de facto herd immunity policy. Although cases have been dropped since their August peak, on September 21 there were 7,851 cases and 201 deaths. Despite efforts in the media to promote the notion that life is "back to normal," in just the last seven days, at least 497 people have died from COVID in France. Under these conditions, the World Health Organization predicts 236,000 further deaths across Europe before December 1.

On Wednesday, Professor Arnaud Fontanet, a member of the Scientific Council, told *Le Parisien*, "We observed the same lull at the end of September 2020, before a cold snap that triggered the second wave in France and neighboring countries," adding that he "expects the epidemic to start up again in the autumn." In 2020, following a summer of comparatively low cases, in the six months following the September reopening of universities and schools French deaths rose from 30,000 to 95,000.

Despite these projections, just like last year, no plans have been made for online classes. On top of mass death, a winter surge of the virus could leave students facing another year of financial uncertainty and educational disruption.

With no quality online alternative to in-person lectures, sick students are incentivized to avoid testing in order to participate in classes.

Students in France, 21 percent of whom live below the poverty line according to the Institute of National Statistics and Economic studies, will also have to pay €49 for a PCR test without a doctor's prescription or €25 for inadequate antigen tests, further disincentivizing those with COVID-19 symptoms from testing. This has created a situation throughout universities where students with multiple COVID-19 symptoms are in crowded classrooms, exposing their peers.

In June 2020, fascistic ex-US president Donald Trump was ridiculed for stating "if we stop testing right

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now, we'd have very few cases." Now this very conception drives the Macron government's health policy, which seeks to undermine support for further lockdowns and social distancing policies by suppressing the true extent of the pandemic.

Despite the increasing number of breakthrough infections, vaccinated students will not be required to isolate after exposure to the virus. Should they choose to isolate, they risk missing lectures and losing grades due to the lack of access to in-person courses online. As vaccine efficacy wanes against new variants, and large numbers of people remain unvaccinated, the Macron government is once again pursuing a deadly and anti-scientific policy of immunity by infection.

In response to this deadly policy, students must turn towards building a movement in the working class fighting for a scientific policy of eradication. Contrary to the myth promoted by governments across Europe and the media, the prevention of mass death and high-quality education are not alternatives. In fact, it is only through a policy of eradication that both goals can be achieved.

Following the shift of courses online in late October last year, French students spent almost an entire university year online. Along with their counterparts across Europe, they endured more than a year of mass death, lost family members, and faced poorly-organized online education.

This contrasts to the situation in New Zealand and China, where an eradication policy resulted in just three months of online classes in universities before summer 2020. Until August 2021, when an importation of the Delta variant from abroad led to a new lockdown, New Zealand continued in-person instruction for over a year. New Zealand has recorded 27 deaths, while China, despite having a population of over 1.45 billion and being the first country hit by the virus, has recorded 4,636 deaths. This compares to the official toll of at least 116,000 deaths in France.

One of the major reasons that Macron has been able to reopen universities without more resistance from students and workers has been the role played by pseudo-left forces such as the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste and student unions in disorienting students. Forming a campaign around the tragic suicides of two students in January of this year, they demanded Macron reopen universities immediately, giving the president a welcome justification to promote a policy of allowing the virus to spread unchecked.

Ultimately supporting Macron's demand that France "live with the virus" in order to protect corporate profits, these groups cynically argued that universities must be opened to safeguard students' mental health. The failure to control COVID-19, however, condemns students and youth to the further loss of loved ones and friends, more isolation, continually disrupted education, and, in many cases, to death. A scientific policy to eradicate the virus with strong social and financial support for all students is the only remedy to the current mental health crisis.

High quality education is a social right. In the context of a deadly pandemic, however, this first and foremost means that the virus must be properly suppressed. Under the current conditions of mass community transmission universities cannot be made safe. They must be closed until the virus is under control, at which point they can be reopened with the correct precautions. If the correct health measures are taken, then this period of isolation would not exceed two or three months.

During this necessary period of lockdown students, as well as all members of society, must be provided with high-quality housing, financial support, computers and a high-speed internet connection. Similarly, exams and other forms of evaluation that are crucial to students' futures must be suspended until this necessary lockdown has finished.

The Parti de l'égalite socialiste, the French section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, is the only political tendency in France that supports a scientific policy of eradication necessary to save lives and to bring the pandemic to an end once and for all. Students and young people who agree with this perspective should contact us today.

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