

French health minister rejects lockdown measures as COVID-19 cases skyrocket

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French Health Minister Olivier Véran delivered a press conference yesterday at noon to announce the Macron government's response to the skyrocketing of COVID-19 cases in the country, with over 33,000 cases reported in the past 24 hours. While admitting that France and Europe were in the midst of a fifth wave, Véran maintained that there would be no lockdowns to restrict virus transmission via the closure of schools or nonessential workplaces.

The seven-day average for cases in France surpassed 20,000 for the first time since last August on Tuesday, reaching almost 22,000 yesterday. Another 265 people died in the past week. Véran spoke under conditions where the World Health Organisation has predicted that, given current government policies, more than 700,000 people will die across Europe (including Russia) from the virus over the next four months.

Yet his speech was a blunt rejection of the appeals by scientists for the implementation of non-pharmaceutical measures, including social distancing policies, to stop the spread of the pandemic.

"Yes, France is experiencing a fifth wave, and it will be without question longer and harder than the fourth wave that we knew in the summer," Véran said. "But there is no fatalism before the coronavirus and its waves." In fact, the Macron government's policy is premised on a fatalistic approval of mass deaths.

Véran's announcements were restricted to measures to increase vaccine uptake in the population. Approximately 75 percent of the population has currently received two doses (89 percent of the adult population). The "health passport," which restricts access to public places to those who are vaccinated, will be extended to require a third vaccine dose within seven months after the second dose. Eligibility for a third dose begins five months after the second.

While the third vaccine dose is being extended to the entire adult population, from those aged over 65 at present, the "health passport" provided by a negative test will be valid for only 24 hours, instead of 72 at present.

While mass vaccination is a necessity for combating the virus, the World Health Organisation and countless scientists have insisted that it is insufficient on its own. Véran's announcements were a direct repudiation of the appeal by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control for the implementation of social distancing measures against a new wave of the pandemic.

In the latest update of the rapid risk assessment for COVID-19 this week, ECDC Director Andrea Ammon warned that "the burden of disease in the EU/[European Economic Area] from the Delta variant will be very high in December and January, unless public health measures are applied now in combination with continued efforts to increase vaccine update in the total population."

Ammon called on governments to "focus on closing this immunity gap, offer booster doses to all adults, and reintroduce non-pharmaceutical measures," i.e., social distancing policies.

Her comments were in line with those of World Health Organisation Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, who stated on Tuesday, "We're concerned about the false sense of security that vaccines have ended the pandemic and people who are vaccinated do not need to take any other precautions. Vaccines save lives, but they do not fully prevent transmission. Data suggests that before the arrival of the Delta variant, vaccines reduced transmission by about 60 percent. With Delta, that has dropped to about 40 percent."

In fact, far from introducing measures to restrict virus transmission, the Macron government's announcement included measures that will significantly *increase* it. Most significantly, Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer announced that primary school classrooms (where children are unvaccinated) will no longer be closed upon the detection of a new case. Instead, children will be tested, and only those who are positive will be confined at home.

Moreover, the vaccination of children under 11 will not begin until next year, meaning that most are to be exposed to infection for six weeks or more.

This measure will clearly result in additional mass infections in schools, given the delay between when a student can catch the virus and when it will show in test results. Yet the announcement is in direct response to the *increase* of classroom closures due to mass infection of children. Total school closures were more than 8,500 on Wednesday, more than double the 4,100 one week earlier.

As with the government's policy as a whole, this measure is dictated by the naked economic interests of the French corporate elite. While schools are acting as transmission vectors for the propagation of the virus, it is essential that they remain open in order that parents be able to continue to work, and that profits continue for French corporations.

The Macron government's policy is in line with the declaration by outgoing German Health Minister Jens Spahn on Thursday last week. "At the end of the winter, pretty much everyone in Germany will, as it's sometimes been put a bit cynically, be vaccinated, recovered or dead," Spahn said. "With the highly infectious Delta variant, it's very likely that anyone who is not vaccinated will get infected in the next few months unless they're very, very careful ..."

The European ruling class has collectively overseen a policy that has led to more than 1.5 million deaths, according to a count realised by AFP based on official statistics yesterday morning. From the beginning of the pandemic, its policy has been dictated by the need to protect the financial interests of the ruling class, not the saving of lives. It is continuing this policy, indifferent to the hundreds of thousands of avoidable deaths that will result from it.

Véran's statements underscore the necessity for a mass political movement of the working class to

enforce a scientific policy against the pandemic. This must be based on a coordinated strategy to eliminate SARS-CoV-2, the virus which causes COVID-19, through a combination of lockdowns and social distancing, and mass vaccination, including a campaign of education of the population on the necessity of vaccines.



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