

As Omicron spreads in Europe, Paris commits to mass COVID-19 infections

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Speaking yesterday on the far-right CNews TV channel, French government spokesman Gabriel Attal confirmed that the highly-mutated and contagious Omicron variant of the coronavirus has likely arrived in France, but that the government will not take action in response.

“We’re still at the monitoring stage,” Attal said. “We have several possible cases, 10 or so. For now, these are potential cases. ... These cases will be genetically sequenced, and we will know in the coming hours if they are cases of the virus.” Nonetheless, Attal insisted that President Emmanuel Macron’s government would not take action to tighten health restrictions and slow or stop the spread of the virus “in the short or medium term.”

Yesterday morning, Health Minister Olivier Véran said it was “a matter of hours” before Omicron cases are confirmed in France but dismissed its significance. “Currently, whether there are two or 10 infections by this variant in Europe or in France does not change the profile of the pandemic wave we are seeing,” Véran said. Complacently declaring that “a new variant does not necessarily mean a new wave,” he admitted that he could not say whether currently existing vaccines would give any protection from the Omicron variant, saying it is “too early” to tell.

Like at the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, governments in France and across Europe are responding to a deadly surge in the virus with politically criminal indifference and complacency.

With nearly 2.7 million cases and 29,298 deaths of COVID-19 confirmed in Europe last week, a surge driven by the Delta variant is already devastating the continent. Seven-day averages of new cases are at all-time highs in Germany (57,598), the Netherlands (22,257) and Denmark (3,994) or surging towards them

in Belgium (17,162) and Poland (22,964). As hospitals collapse in parts of Germany, Austria and the Netherlands, patients are already being sent across national borders to less affected parts of Germany and Italy for treatment.

France is rapidly catching up to its worse hit northern neighbors. On November 27, 37,218 cases were COVID-19 cases were reported in France, and ICU occupancy for COVID-19 patients reached 1,617 with 9,271 people hospitalized for COVID-19, levels not seen since the peak of the fourth wave in mid-September. The seven-day average for infections is 27,597, and each day averaged 61 deaths last week in France, respective increases of 61 percent and 38 percent on the previous week.

Under these conditions, the spread of the newly identified Omicron variant, which is thought to be at least partially resistant to existing vaccines and more infectious and lethal than the Delta variant, threatens to provoke a horrific wave of death in the coming weeks.

The spread of the Omicron variant threatens to deepen already devastating conditions across the continent. The variant has been identified in Germany, Italy, Czechia, Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium and the UK. On Sunday, it was reported that 13 people on just two flights from South Africa to the Netherlands tested positive for the variant.

One worrying sign about Omicron’s resistance to existing vaccines is a report that a person who tested positive for the Omicron variant in Israel had received three doses of the vaccine. The French Health Ministry has also announced that those who have been in contact with individuals infected with the Omicron variant will have to self-isolate, whether or not they are vaccinated.

In South Africa, the Omicron variant is already “out-competing” the Delta variant and has become dominant

in just 13 days, compared to the 50 days it took for the Delta variant to account for more than 50 percent of cases in the country, according to data from the *Financial Times*. As this variant has become dominant, South Africa has witnessed a huge surge in infections and deaths. In the last seven days, infections rose 231 percent to 11,661, and deaths rose 128 percent to 219.

Any circulation of the Omicron variant threatens another massive increase in infections and deaths, creating a further wave on top of the current surge. Despite the immediate and deadly risk posed by both Delta and Omicron variants to the French population, there are no significant health measures in place. Schools, workplaces, universities, restaurants and even nightclubs all remain open, creating conditions where the current surge will only continue to spiral.

The WHO's projection released last week that 700,000 Europeans will die before March 2022 without further restrictions was based on the Delta variant. If, in addition, a highly infectious and lethal variant unaffected by existing vaccines were to tear across an unprotected population, the death toll could easily be in the millions.

Preventing this requires immediate implementation of social distancing measures, including strict lockdowns, closing schools and nonessential production, to eliminate transmission of all variants of the virus. This also entails the allocation of trillions of euros to workers, the self-employed and small businesses to allow them to survive without hardship for a period.

Imposing this entails building a political movement in the working class against the European Union (EU) and the Macron government, which have demanded a policy of mass infection to keep workers on the job, producing profits for the financial markets. This is what V eran meant last week when he said: "We can succeed in crossing this wave without further constraints for the population." In reality, the Macron government does not care about lives but about the profits of the major banks and corporations.

On Friday, Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer affirmed the Macron government's commitment to the anti-scientific notion of immunity by infection among school children. With 9,000 classes closed due to COVID-19 across the country, Blanquer confirmed to France Inter that classes with positive cases will no longer be closed. This will inevitably accelerate the

spread of the coronavirus in schools, after the government's school policy has already led to hundreds of thousands of cases, thousands of Long COVID cases and over a dozen deaths among children.

Indeed, COVID-19 incidence rates per 100,000 children in France doubled last week to 70.53 among children under 3, 172.83 among those aged 6-10 and 212.42 among those aged 11-14. It rose by 60 percent to 141.18 among teens aged 15-17. It tripled to 346.19 among children aged 6-10.

The current situation has sinister echoes of the situation in February and March 2020. At that time, the government was firmly opposed to any social distancing measures. As late as March 3, 2020, with the danger of the virus already well known to French health authorities, Blanquer said, "It wouldn't make sense to confine everyone at home, to paralyze the country."

It was only following a wave of wildcat strikes that began in Italy and spread through France, the UK, and eventually to the US that compelled European governments in mid-March to implement significant lockdown measures which rapidly brought down cases and deaths in the region.

The alarm must be raised in France and across Europe. Now as then, only a mass movement of the working class can force the implementation of the health policies necessary to save hundreds of thousands or millions of lives. Workers must form rank-and-file health committees in factories, schools and workplaces to prepare a struggle for the immediate implementation of scientific health policies to eliminate the virus.



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