French government rejects scientists' calls to limit spread of Omicron variant

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On Saturday, French Health Minister Olivier Véran rejected appeals from his own scientific advisers for emergency social restrictions to stop the spread of the Omicron variant of COVID-19. France is posting record infection figures with 1 million active cases of COVID-19 and 50,000 to 65,000 daily infections, and more than 3,000 school classes were closed at the end of last week because of infections of teachers and children.

Nonetheless, Véran opposed any lockdown or shelter-at-home orders limiting social interactions to stop viral transmission, claiming "the effectiveness of such measures" is too weak. He added, "I think that given the speed at which the Omicron variant circulates, limitations on seating arrangements or closings of buildings would not have as significant an impact as what they could have with less contagious variants."

In fact, this contradicted the advice of France's Scientific Council on COVID-19, which declared that strict social restrictions are the only way to prevent mass infection. Shortly before Véran spoke, it had published an article that effectively admitted the failure of the government's policy of relying only on vaccines to limit deaths from the virus, since the Omicron variant is highly resistant to existing vaccines. It called on the French people to "spend Christmas 2021 in small groups, testing yourself beforehand, and make sure the elderly have had their booster [vaccine] doses."

Above all, it stressed the need for public health measures like stay-at-home orders to eliminate transmission of the virus and prevent an uncontrolled spread of Omicron: "Given the acceleration of the epidemic, and the risks arising from end-of-year parties, significant social restrictions must be authorized by state authorities during the holiday season (including if necessary in the form of collective limitations on social activity or curfews), potentially with the response adapted to conditions in each region."

The Council stressed its fear that "there could emerge a series of Omicron mini-clusters, which could spread very rapidly in the coming days throughout the entire country, given population movements" during the holidays.

Against the Scientific Council, Véran advanced the absurd argument that the transmission of the Omicron variant would be extremely fast but would have at most a limited impact. "Omicron, if it begins to circulate, will most likely circulate very fast, very strongly, with an extremely violent wave, but it will be very fleeting," he claimed.

As this prediction is already being refuted by the facts, Véran tried to cover himself, arguing: "We are always anticipating things and at the same time adapting our response according to the level of the threat. The truth today may not be the truth of tomorrow."

In fact, what Véran claims to be the truth is not the truth, either today or yesterday, much less tomorrow. His claim that the current wave of infections will only have a "fleeting" impact is directly contradicted by the massive influx of seriously ill patients that is swamping hospitals, as well as by the statements of other government officials.

In a TV interview last Wednesday, aiming to reassure the financial aristocracy that he would pursue social austerity measures in the presidential elections, President Emmanuel Macron admitted: "We must always be prudent. We have seen this from the beginning, what sets the rules is the virus. Very probably, between Christmas and New Year, our

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hospitals will be under enormous pressure."

That same morning, government spokesman Gabriel Attal had made similar points. He indicated that "more than 1,700 people were admitted to hospital, including 400 in emergency wards, pressure will continue to mount in the coming weeks." The number of people positive for the virus and hospitalized in emergency rooms, he added, could "reach the level of 4,000 people during the holidays."

Against the virus, Attal said the government would bet everything on furnishing a third booster dose: "820,000 booster shots took place yesterday, and the objective of 20 million Frenchmen with a booster dose by Christmas will be met." Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer also said he would favor vaccinating children aged 5 to 11 by the end of the year. Children considered medically vulnerable are already eligible for vaccines starting last week.

This strategy will do nothing to halt the Omicron variant, however, which is vaccine-resistant and responsible for hundreds of confirmed cases of COVID-19 in France. The rising number of infections despite the substantial number of vaccinated people in the country exposes the bankruptcy of Macron's strategy of betting everything on vaccinations. With the Omicron variant more resistant to vaccines and a third vaccine dose not furnishing more than 70 percent effective immunity from the new variant, the health crisis is set to deepen rapidly.

Britain is seeing an explosion of cases driven by the Omicron variant, with 93,045 cases in one day last week, a record since the pandemic began. The propagation of the Omicron variant, according to different models, could lead to 8 million cases in a few weeks. The French government has responded by announcing stepped-up border controls, demanding a PCR test less than 24 hours old from all travelers from the United Kingdom and a mandatory seven-day isolation period, cut to 48 hours if a negative test is done.

Macron's reaction to the pandemic is politically criminal. For almost the entire year, it called for relying only on vaccines, hoping to avoid a broader mobilization of the public to halt the pandemic, and aiming to force youth and nonessential workers to keep going to school and work, pumping out a regular flow of profits to the banks. The virus could circulate, government officials insinuated, but vaccines would keep the danger to the public within acceptable limits.

Now the Macron government is terrified, as Europe faces a fifth surge of cases in the pandemic and the Omicron variant prepares a sixth. More than anything else, the government fears working-class anger against its policy of allowing mass infection.

In an article titled "COVID-19: why the government fears the arrival of the Omicron variant," Europe1 reported that "inside the government, it's panic on every floor or almost." It added, "Off the record, one minister did not hide his concerns from Europe1. 'We are really frightened that this variant will be resistant to vaccines. If that is the case, it can get really terrible with public opinion,' declares an influential minister in the government. … Five months from the presidential election, the prospect of seeing this strategy fall apart has Macron's supporters in a cold sweat."

Before the pandemic, Macron faced mass "yellow vest" protests and strikes against austerity amid an international upsurge of the class struggle against social inequality. European governments' decisions to carry out strict lockdowns in March 2020 in France and other European countries was forced on capitalist governments. It was for them the only way to deal with a wave of wildcat strikes that erupted as workers in auto, steel and logistics demanded the right to shelter at home to avoid infection across Europe and also in the United States.

It is now critical to struggle for a European and international mobilization of the working class to impose a scientific policy to eliminate the transmission of COVID-19.

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