

French teachers launch one-day strike against Macron's COVID-19 policy

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Today, French teachers are mounting a nationwide, one-day strike against the government of French President Emmanuel Macron and its school health protocols for COVID-19. Also joining the strike are school inspectors and nurses, a reflection of mounting anger and public alarm as the Omicron variant spreads massively across Europe.

This strike is part of an emerging international mobilization of the working class and youth against capitalist governments' subordination of health and life to private profit. Last week, as teachers in France prepared to go out on strike, Chicago teachers voted to reject a return to in-person learning, which the trade unions working with the city administration is attempting to overturn. Protests are proceeding and petitions are circulating against keeping schools open during the Omicron wave in New York, San Francisco, Boston and beyond.

The crisis in the French schools epitomizes the disaster unfolding internationally as schools are kept open, with barely any safety measures in place, while over 7 million people catch COVID-19 each week in Europe. A week ago, according to the latest official figures, 3.2 percent of elementary and junior high students and 4.7 percent of high school students had COVID-19. With Omicron, these incidence rates are doubling at least once a week. Today, over 5.6 percent of the population overall has the virus.

Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer did not even bother to inform school staff of the health protocols as the winter term began on January 3. He released an initial protocol to the media on January 2, less than 24 hours before classes were to begin. The protocols were introduced chaotically, constantly modified and designed to keep classes open even as COVID-19 cases explode. The result is an unmitigated disaster.

Three-quarters of teachers are expected to join in the

strike, shutting down half of the nation's schools. This mass support reflects the bitter experiences workers have had in virtually every country, as governments forced the opening of unsafe workplaces and schools, costing over 123,000 lives in France and 1.5 million in Europe.

One school teacher told the WSW, "We have students who have lost their parents or grandparents and who blame themselves for it ... and it's in our arms that they break down and cry. Such things matter. We are living horrible experiences.

"I am angry, extremely angry," she added, denouncing protocols and unreliable testing kits imposed by Blanquer. "It changes every three days, from one day to the next, in statements to the press. It is intolerable for us, facing parents the next day without official confirmation of what we are doing. The government has visibly abandoned any idea of protecting schools from COVID-19."

Another school teacher spoke to the WSW of her fears of Long COVID affecting generations of children in the future. "I am outraged. Data on the virus, though it is still not well understood, shows that it persists inside the body and leads to lasting damage in both adults and children. ... I am very angry that we are letting the virus spread like this, inciting children to go to school without knowing what these generations will suffer in terms of health consequences."

This eruption of anger has compelled the French teachers unions to finally authorize strike action. The same unions isolated teachers who went on wildcat strikes against an unsafe return to schools in November 2020, even as they were assaulted by Macron's riot police.

Union official Stéphane Crochet told France-Info, "There is anger among all teachers, from kindergarten to high school. We have colleagues crying as they spend their entire evenings sending messages to families to explain the new protocols. ... Among the rank and file, tensions are very sharp. We have never seen this level of

exasperation and exhaustion.”

A class confrontation is emerging between the teachers and the Macron government. Even as France posts record infection totals day after day, with 368,149 cases yesterday, Macron is signaling that he does not intend to move an inch from policies of mass infection adopted throughout the entire European Union (EU), in the United States and internationally.

Prime Minister Jean Castex, who said last month he would rely on a vaccine-only approach to the pandemic, has boasted that France is “the country that has kept its schools open the longest.” Insisting that schools cannot shut classes when infections occur in them “because otherwise every school in France would be closed,” he pledged, “We will not shut down the schools or the country.”

Blanquer, who has overseen a wage freeze in education during Macron’s term, has made no secret of his contempt for teachers who oppose his use of schools as holding pens, so that parents can be forced to go to work and make profits for the banks. Calling for “unity of the Nation around its schools,” he lectured them for lacking patriotism, “One does not go on strike against a virus.”

Teachers face a merciless political struggle against the Macron government, in which their natural allies are workers internationally entering into struggle against state policies of mass infection.

School strikes and protests are growing across the United States, and across Europe campaigners for safe schools such as Lisa Diaz in Britain are fighting media slander campaigns attacking them for not sending their children into unsafe schools. And explosive anger is building up in factories and workplaces around the world against the ruling elites’ policies of mass infection after two years of the pandemic.

To wage a political fight against the Macron government, teachers must take the struggle out of the hands of national union bureaucracies. Having abstained from taking action over the two years of the pandemic, these bureaucracies have long records of calling and then selling out one-day strikes in order to reach deals with successive governments in France and across Europe.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown more clearly than ever before that there is nothing to negotiate with governments like that of Macron. Such negotiations have already produced cuts to pensions, job security, and workers’ salaries in the interests of the banks. Now it is not only the livelihoods but the lives of hundreds of thousands and millions of workers around the world that

are under threat.

In November, before Omicron emerged, the World Health Organization (WHO) projected that COVID-19 would claim 500,000 lives by April in Europe. Currently, over 1,500 people die in France, 20,000 across Europe and 46,000 worldwide each week. On Tuesday, the WHO warned that over half of Europe will catch the Omicron variant in two months, based on current health protocols, swamping hospitals and triggering an even greater surge in deaths. Yet Paris and other European governments reacted not by tightening but by loosening health restrictions.

Against governments capable of such monstrous policies, the way forward is to build a powerful international movement in the working class to oppose and ultimately crush the ruling elite’s resistance to a scientific policy in the interests of the great mass of the working population.

The way forward is the construction of rank-and-file committees internationally in schools and workplaces, independent of the trade unions, to coordinate strikes and actions to impose a global, scientifically guided health policy to stop the pandemic and eliminate transmission of the virus. They can also fight far-right media propaganda against vaccination and public health measures and educate workers and youth on how to end the pandemic. This requires a lockdown, the end of in-person education and nonessential production and the pursuit of a Zero COVID policy.

The *Parti de l’égalité socialiste* calls on to teachers, youth and workers interested in joining such committees in their countries and stopping the pandemic to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* and fight to build the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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