

French teachers strike vs. COVID-19 policies

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With COVID-19 cases exploding across Europe, an international mass movement is building against government policies leading to massive infections in the schools. As French teachers mounted a nationwide strike against the disastrous handling of the COVID-19 pandemic yesterday, Italian students were preparing for a nationwide walkout today amid mass support for distance learning and opposition to studying in unsafe schools.

The French teachers' strike, organized around a statement criticizing "risky gambles on health" as the state "loosens testing and isolation measures," obtained massive support. French teachers' unions claimed 75 percent participation by primary school teachers and 62 percent by high school teachers in the strike, which shut down approximately half of schools in France. The remainder functioned with skeleton staffs.

French riot police violently assaulted high school students who began the protest in a number of cities by blockading their schools when they normally would have opened. In Paris, they beat and tasered students outside Colbert high school, and kettled and searched students protesting outside Hélène Boucher high school, arresting two. Police also wounded one student, driving a police car through a crowd of protesting students outside a high school in Nantes.

Marches began in the early afternoon, after general assembly meetings held in several schools under the auspices of trade union officials later in the morning. Teachers chanted "Their profits, our schools sacrificed," shouted slogans against Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer, and sang songs from the 2018–2019 "yellow vest" protests against social inequality. Large marches took place in Marseille, Lyon, Toulouse, Bordeaux, Nice, Grenoble, Chambéry, and other cities, as well as in the capital, Paris.

In Paris, candidates in the upcoming April presidential elections tried to walk at the head of the march: Socialist Party (PS) mayor of Paris Anne Hidalgo, Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF) deputy Fabien Roussel, and "left populist" candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon. These parties

have not organized any left-wing opposition to President Emmanuel Macron's policies of mass infection, however. LFI in fact helped promote anti-vaccine protests this summer. Given their records, these candidates received a number of hostile comments from the crowd.

"We don't care if you're prancing around," one protester shouted at Hidalgo, while another told *France Info*: "Anne Hidalgo and the PS in general have really not defended education. Now, teachers and the entire world of education are really angry. ... Anne Hidalgo, I don't care about her."

Mass protests are also unfolding today in Italy, as the Stalinist-linked Union of Students (UDS) calls a nationwide walkout against a "dangerous return to school" after Italian school holidays ended Monday. This followed walkouts earlier this week by high school students in the regions of Campania, Ancona, Ascoli and Sardinia opposing the return to schools. A student told ANSA News: "We all agree that distance learning is harmful to the socialization and coexistence of students, but the right to health and not to be infected is now more important."

Announcing the nationwide student strike, UDS coordinator Luca Redolfi blamed the Italian government: "After almost two years of the pandemic, it is unacceptable that schools are still unprepared. ... Mass transit and classrooms are overcrowded, school buildings are unfit to deal with the pandemic, testing is often not done, N95 masks are not guaranteed, and contact-tracing system is exploded."

Nonetheless, while calls for distance learning are largely popular among Italian youth, the UDS's Redolfi echoed the Italian government's position, claiming: "The solution cannot however be distance learning, as it has been shown that distance learning can only be a tool in emergencies." What this bankrupt argument overlooks is the fact that the pandemic is a European and global emergency.

This week saw 2 million new COVID-19 cases in France, 1.2 million in Italy, 1 million in Britain, and 7.7

million cases and 20,899 deaths in Europe overall. Infections are rising by 50 percent each week, and the World Health Organization (WHO) has warned that government policies mean more than half of Europe's population will catch COVID-19 in the next six to eight weeks. France and Italy alone have over 4 million and 2.2 million active cases of COVID-19, respectively. This means 6 percent of the French population and 3.6 percent of Italians currently have COVID-19.

These horrific conditions are provoking protests and strike actions internationally, with protests by US teachers in Chicago, San Francisco, New York, and Boston and now across Europe. The initial mobilizations of workers and youth are blowing apart the pretense that there is any popular support for state policies of mass infection. Measures to allow governments to force sick and infectious workers back to work after brief isolation periods of five to seven days, or to force students to stay in crowded, infected classrooms amid a massive upsurge of the virus, provoke mass anger and concern.

This was further underscored by two polls this month of European students. Last week, 78 percent of 10,000 Sorbonne University students in Paris said they opposed the university's decision to force them to sit for exams by the hundreds in large rooms together, thus helping spread the virus. This week, as Italian students returned to classes, the Skuola teaching portal carried out a poll that found that 69 percent of Italian students support a shift to distance learning.

The decisive issue is what political perspective and leadership this emerging international movement of workers and youth needs to halt the pandemic and end the subordination of health and lives to private profit. The haphazard mitigation policies and one-day strikes advocated by the unions will not stop the virus, which is airborne and can infect both the vaccinated and the previously infected. Nor will they change the minds of governments that are determined to keep youth at school and workers at work, producing profits for the banks.

The alternative is to organize rank-and-file committees in schools, factories and workplaces across Europe and internationally, independent of the national trade union bureaucracies, to mobilize the working class and youth for a global fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. This requires a political struggle, organizing internationally the full industrial might of the working class to close schools and non-essential production and impose a scientifically guided Zero-Covid policy.

The danger is that without an international perspective

and program, the political establishment can use one-day strikes to try to lull the population to sleep and delay action, when in fact, time is of the essence in order to prevent further mass death. Perhaps the most perfected example of this are the factions of the French trade union bureaucracy that the media traditionally promote as "radical."

Yesterday evening, the French unions held an emergency meeting with Blanquer and via videoconference with Health Minister Olivier Véran, who has tested positive for COVID-19. While Blanquer promised more N95 masks, testing kits and substitute teachers to replace the sick, he made clear that the government does not intend to change its policy of refusing to block transmission of the virus in schools by shutting down classes where students fall ill.

Coming out of the meeting with Blanquer, high school teachers' union official Sophie Vénétiay indicated that the unions simply want Blanquer to more effectively market the inadequate policies he had announced. She said: "There are a few signals, but we need more. Tonight's promises must be kept because we've had big discussions without results before. The discussions that were scheduled must happen, and there must be changes in public relations."

Similarly, France's Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT) union has announced a further one-day strike in two weeks, for January 27. By that time, however, if nothing is done, tens of thousands more people will have died and tens of millions more will have fallen ill with COVID-19 across Europe.

The alternative is to link up the independent, rank-and-file organizations of the working class internationally, forge the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), and mobilize the working class in a political struggle to stop the pandemic. The *Parti de l'égalité socialiste* calls on to teachers, youth and workers interested in joining such committees to contact the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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