

French *Révolution permanente* group blocks fight against Macron's mass infection policy

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As teachers and students mobilize in the United States, France, Italy, Greece and beyond against official pandemic protocols, the *Révolution permanente* group linked to the Pabloite New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) is working to block a fight to halt mass infections in schools.

A class gulf separates it from the call by the *Parti de l'égalité socialiste* (PES) to build independent, rank-and-file committees to wage a united, international struggle against the pandemic. While calling on teachers to join mobilizations like today's French school strike, it works to tie them to the bankrupt national framework of trade union talks with President Emmanuel Macron.

While calling for further one-day strikes after the January 13 French teachers strike, *Révolution permanente* abstains above all from the necessarily international fight to end the pandemic. Tacitly accepting Macron's arguments that one must accept mass infections and "live with the virus," it advances demands for a few mitigation policies to marginally slow the spread of the virus, combined with calls for wage increases. In its article "Historical strike in education: continue and deepen the struggle," it calls for more one-day strikes in a purely national framework:

It is, indeed, a matter of 'striking while the iron is hot.' ... This is the only way we can win what teachers have demanded for months or even years: a health protocol up to the task, hiring enough full-time staff for public education, reducing class sizes during the pandemic, wage increases after a ten-year wage freeze, the ending of [Education Minister Jean-Michel] Blanquer's baccalaureate reform, the Parcoursup university reform, and the canceling of testing in a context of a two-year pandemic, which condemns students to a class-based selection on their futures.

A "health protocol up to the task," however, can only mean one that ends the COVID-19 pandemic. Over 18 million people have died worldwide from the virus, 1.5 million in Europe and 127,000 in France; every week it claims over 1,000 lives in

France and 20,000 in Europe. Striking teachers have described children going to school terrified of infecting their parents and grandparents or traumatized by the experience of transmitting a virus that killed their loved ones. The long-term impact of the virus, which remains present in children's brains and other vital organs, is unknown.

Given the highly contagious, airborne nature of the Omicron variant, reducing class sizes during the pandemic, as *Révolution permanente* demands, will not stop the pandemic. After France posted nearly 500,000 cases for two straight days, around 5.5 million people, or 8 percent of the French population, is now ill with COVID-19. With isolation protocols relaxed so that employers can force the sick back to work, the virus will keep circulating massively across society, including in schools, even if students sit a bit farther from each other in classrooms.

The only way to stop mass circulation of the virus is an international lockdown, shutting down non-essential production and moving to online learning. Unlike the strict lockdown in France in the early months of the pandemic, this requires extensive financial support for workers and small businesses affected by the lockdown; massive investment in online learning; and contact tracing after the lockdown ends, to prevent a resurgence of the contagion and pursue a Zero Covid policy.

Révolution permanente maintains a deafening silence on the fact that several Asian-Pacific countries including China, Taiwan, and—until it capitulated to demands from the banks—New Zealand pursued a Zero Covid policy. This succeeded in halting the pandemic in a few months and stopping resurgences of the virus imported from abroad. China's 1.4 billion population suffered fewer than 5,000 deaths, far less economic dislocation, and far fewer limitations on personal movement than Europeans.

Révolution permanente is silent on the necessity of ending the pandemic, not because it is impossible, but because it cuts across the political orientation and material interests it defends. Aiming to carve out a niche for itself in France's petty-bourgeois trade union bureaucracy, and work within the framework of its negotiations with the capitalist state, it advances the political fiction that these bureaucracies are mobilizing the working class in struggle against Macron.

Calling to “amplify the movement, by organizing and broadening assemblies of strikers at the local level,” it writes:

More broadly, we must seek to build and demand from the trade union leaderships a battle plan for the entire world of labor, among others with the perspective of building a one-day strike that is as massive as possible on January 27. We have everything to gain from such a junction. ... While strikes are taking place over wages, and corporate profits are exploding, we must insist on the need for wage increases for all. Finally, an alternative health strategy to that proposed by the government must urgently be imposed, controlled by workers and the population, not at the orders of the Medef business federation.

It is pointless to demand from the trade union bureaucracy a “battle plan” against the Macron government. After massive participation in the January 13 nationwide strike, union officials said only that they would try to ensure that Blanquer kept his promises to provide a few more N95 masks to the most vulnerable staff and hire a few more substitute teachers. They laid out no plan even to slow the tidal wave of COVID-19 infections ripping through schools, let alone end the havoc caused by the pandemic.

The unions simply worked to sell to the public the policies of the Macron government, which has already rejected online learning out of hand. Assemblies of strikers, that is, rank-and-file committees answerable to the workers, must be built to fight Macron’s policies of austerity and mass infection. However, they can only be built on an international basis, independent of the national union bureaucracies, and in a conscious and open struggle for socialism against the capitalist system.

The PES, the French section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), insists that fighting the pandemic ultimately requires a conscious rejection of the petty-bourgeois politics of groups like the NPA, *Révolution permanente* and its Argentine affiliates, the Morenoite Socialist Workers Party (PTS) and the *Izquierda Diario* web sites.

Like World War I—which could only be stopped after the October 1917 revolution in Russia and the revolutionary uprisings of the German working class in 1918—the pandemic is a trigger event in world history. The European ruling elites’ inability to pursue a scientific policy against COVID-19 is bound up with a deep, insoluble crisis of the capitalist system that can only be halted by its overthrow in a struggle of the international working class for socialism.

The financial aristocracy reacted to the pandemic by demanding massive state bailouts in the United States, Britain and the euro zone, to transfer public wealth directly into its

pockets. While European billionaires alone added over 1 trillion dollars to their wealth in the first year of the pandemic, these sums were financed by massive increases in public debt. Sovereign debt has now reached an unsustainable 116 percent in France, 122 percent in Spain, and 155 percent in Italy.

Under such conditions, a struggle for wage gains by teachers and broader layers of workers entails a direct clash with the super-rich financial parasites who dominate society and their defenders in the capitalist state machine.

Critical political lessons must be drawn from the experience of the NPA’s Greek allies, SYRIZA (the “Coalition of the Radical Left”). After the European Union (EU) imposed bitter austerity that ballooned Greek public debt out to the levels now reached by major European economies, SYRIZA, a coalition of Stalinists and allies of Britain’s pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party (SWP), was elected in 2015. Hailed by the NPA, it pledged to end EU austerity.

SYRIZA, tied to nationalism and the Greek union bureaucracy, was terrified however of demands in the working class that went well beyond what it could accept. In just a few months, it repudiated its election promises, aligned with the EU and the Greek bourgeoisie, and imposed tens of billions of euros in new social cuts. It went on to arm Saudi Arabia for its bloody war in Yemen, set up mass detention camps for refugees on the Greek islands, and—for good measure—to declare that it shared “common democratic principles” with the billionaire then-US president, Donald Trump.

A powerful movement is emerging among workers and youth internationally, against a virus that knows no borders and needs no passports, and that can only be stopped on a world level. Arming this movement with the political consciousness and program it needs to halt the pandemic and subordinate the economy to the crucial needs of society requires a break with the pseudo-left forces that, like SYRIZA before them, cover for the ruling elite’s capitulation to the virus.

The ICFI is conducting a Global Workers’ Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic to arm workers with a scientific understanding of the pandemic, the responsibility of the ruling class, and how it can be stopped. Fighting to halt the pandemic and impose scientific policies, however, depends on the formation of independent, rank-and-file committees that break with the orientation of the union bureaucracies and *Révolution permanente* to negotiate with Macron, and take up an international struggle for socialism.



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