

French high school students speak on COVID-19 pandemic: “The government waits without taking action... I find that cruel and sick.”

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The WSWWS interviewed Laura, a high school student in the suburbs of Paris, about her and her friends' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. She emphasized how this experience of constant uncertainty and danger, with so much illness and death, has left a lasting impression on an entire generation of young people.

Laura said, “Right now I’m a senior in high school, and when COVID started, I was a sophomore. So, you could say that all of my years as a high school student have been in the COVID atmosphere. It’s become a routine to show up to class, see people absent every week, check in with people who are absent, know that they probably have COVID. There are a lot of absences among my teachers as well, especially with Omicron. We have gaps between classes.”

While each week Europe records 8.7 million cases of COVID-19 and France 2.3 million, or 3.6 percent of its population, Laura reported, “I have many friends who have had it and have it now. Every day I find out that I have had contact with someone who now has COVID. I get tested every day, even though I am vaccinated.”

The worst, she added, is the lack of any real perspective on improving the situation, as the Macron government proposes to let the virus spread and rely solely on the vaccine to try to prevent an even larger explosion of deaths.

“We don’t see the end of COVID,” she said. “We’re feeling a little helpless in this situation, we’re just in the pandemic and we’re trying to adjust to it because we don’t have much choice. We’re pretty stressed about our future, about higher education, about how the

situation will evolve, if the government is going to adjust to the fact that we’ve been through a complicated situation like this. We’re going to be in a difficult situation as we have academic gaps due to COVID.”

Laura pointed to the huge problems in classrooms caused by the Macron administration’s stubborn refusal to implement distance learning, while large numbers of high school students are absent while sick with COVID-19.

She explained, “It’s pretty complicated to come back to class and make up all the days you’ve spent at home, because there’s no distance learning. ... We have six cases in our class. They didn’t catch COVID at the same time, so they didn’t come back to class at the same time. So it is really complicated to set up instruction so that students can catch up on what they have missed. And because of that, gaps develop.”

Laura noted the lack of any intervention in the high schools by the unions or established political parties, so that high school students and teachers are largely left to their own devices. While the government and school administrators do everything to minimize reports of cases and thus justify their abandonment of health restrictions to let the virus circulate, young people are in limbo on essential information about the virus.

Laura said, “We just talk about it in groups of friends when we eat. Even the school doesn’t tell us when there are cases, we find out from a friend of a friend. ... There’s an email that’s set up by the school, which is supposed to warn about contact cases and COVID, but we don’t know anything. We find out that someone has

COVID through the school, but it's never through the high school staff."

She criticized the state-imposed health protocols for keeping kids in high school as much as possible, thus allowing their parents to stay at work to make profits for their employers. She said, "When a COVID case emerges, we should close the whole class, but they base their actions on whether you had the mask on or not when you were next to the person who had COV.ID. For them, if you had the mask on when you were next to them, you were not exposed to the virus at all. Even if we had the mask down, if it was just for a few minutes, they claim we are not exposed."

She explained, "There is a friend of mine who accompanied her friend to the pharmacy with the mask down, and at that moment he learned that he had COVID. And they told her, you haven't spent enough time with your mask down to be considered exposed. So she went back to school after doing an antigen test."

And Laura added that, faced with a virus transmitted by aerosols through the air, it is almost impossible for students to protect themselves systematically. "In the cafeteria, we all have our masks down to eat. For sports classes, we have to put our masks down for practice, even if we keep them on in the locker room."

Above all, she testified to the incomprehension and anger of the youth at the inaction of the government, which is letting the virus circulate throughout society. "We think that at some point, and this limit is probably already passed, we will be obliged to do like last year and go into confinement, and we prefer that this measure is taken much earlier, a strict confinement, before the situation degenerates. They wait until it gets worse, until they have no other choice. They don't take action in advance."

She stressed her opposition to attempts like those of the Macron government to justify inaction in the face of the contagion by calling for 'living with the virus' and putting profits ahead of lives.

She said: 'I know that in some TV programs, people say that we have to get used to living in the pandemic, that it will stay for a long time. And so our immune system, by living with the virus, will get stronger and there will be an end to it. But the problem is that even though the variant has a lower mortality rate, there are still deaths. And the fact that the government is just waiting without taking any action, I find that cruel and

sick. People are dying every day."



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