

French students denounce state inaction on COVID

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WSWS reporters interviewed students in the Paris suburbs on the wave of COVID-19 infections from December to February, driven by the Omicron variant. As European governments end all measures to limit infections, youth expressed their anger over the negligence of the government and their support for a policy of stopping transmission of the virus to put an end to the pandemic.

They all have noted the flagrant contempt of President Emmanuel Macron's government for their health and the proper organization of their studies.

Emilie, a high school student, explained: "The health situation at school was really catastrophic during Christmas when the number of infections rose, leading to 15 absentees in our class. Despite the discontent of students, teachers and a protest from the lead teacher, in-person lessons went ahead anyway, supposedly because the students had masks and were not at risk. The health situation has not been dealt with seriously."

Marjorie, a university student at Paris-IX, said: "We are supposed to concentrate on our studies, but I wonder how is this possible, knowing that COVID is present in my class but that the class has not been shut down. Every day is the same ... We are constantly stressed out by our studies, not knowing even where that is leading. We feel oppressed by the government and ignored."

"During January, nearly all my fellow students caught COVID, the school became a real cluster of positive cases," remarked Céline, a high school student in Blanc-Menil, who described her condition as being in "desperation" at the government's public health announcements, which she called "very illogical."

All the students noted the incoherence of the Macron government's proposed health measures and criticized his refusal to introduce distance learning or even to

halve class sizes in schools.

Marjorie said: "The more we go forward in time, the more the government's measures appear crazy. For example, we have arrow-signalled passageways in our school. I don't think COVID circulates in a specific direction according to arrows. To my mind, it is useless to put arrows everywhere when everyone is confined to the same space for more than an hour. And what's more, the regulation that we cannot drink coffee standing is totally crazy. It is not as if COVID circulates only 5 foot 6 inches above the ground. These measures are ridiculous."

Emilie recounted that when mass absences prevented the normal functioning of her classes, "my main teacher went to complain to the administration demanding the closure of the class. He was told, 'It is not possible, the students are wearing masks.' I really hope this situation will change."

The girls also complained about the limited restrictive regulations on "contact cases," i.e., students exposed to the virus. By limiting the number of youth declared as contact cases in school, Macron has kept a maximum number of youth in class to keep their parents at work making profits for the banks. This decision was taken with contempt for the health, education and even the lives of young people and their families.

"Why are we not contact cases when wearing a mask and sitting next to a student who has tested positive for COVID? The media and government themselves explain that surgical masks do not protect enough from COVID," noted Céline, who criticized the "incoherence" of the government in allowing even sick students to return to school and infect their friends in class.

She said: "I had a friend in class who had COVID the first week back in school. She was in quarantine for a

week. However, after seven days her PCR test was still positive. The senior school administrator told her to come back, even if she still tested positive, because she was vaccinated. I think that this is not right to force her to return to school even if she was vaccinated. She still felt unwell and was extremely pale, but obliged to be in school.”

Marjorie described her feeling of “suffocating” on public transport, when everyone is “squashed together like sardines” at rush hour. “The media talk a lot about COVID but never discuss the conditions that people endure during the rush hour ... Every day, students and workers have to get to school and work, obliged to use public transport. It has become a nightmare to use it, for fear of catching the virus.”

While in 2021 already 2 million children across the globe had lost at least one parent due to COVID-19, Marjorie emphasized the fear so many youth have of infecting their families. As regards her unease on public transport, she said: “Personally, I have members of my family who are vulnerable. I just cannot even accept getting infected with COVID for fear of contaminating my sick family members.”

The pandemic is an indelible experience for a generation of youth, not only in France, but across the globe. After two years, Emilie affirms, “We clearly see that COVID has changed the lives of all students.”

This brutal experience has given rise to an anger and growing opposition of youth and workers to the policies of the banks and the Macron government to eliminate all health measures aimed at stopping the transmission of the virus, except the use of masks by individuals, which is not even mandated.

Emilie said, “I think that mask wearing is insufficient. We must limit mass gatherings and it seems there are no longer any protective measures in open public spaces.”

Marjorie emphasized the example of China, which has stomped out the pandemic and thus better saved lives. Indeed, China has experienced new cases of COVID-19 imported from abroad but has not reported any deaths from COVID-19 since the end of 2020. From March 2020 to the present, China has only detected 29,000 cases, compared to the 42,000 cases detected in one day two days ago in France.

Marjorie compared China’s record to that of Macron, the “president of the rich,” saying; “Take the example

of China to illustrate the fact that it is not impossible to combat the pandemic, but that it is the government which decides to do nothing. In China, they put in place restrictions very early, isolated cases and reduced the virus circulation. However, in France and everywhere in Europe we are drowning in COVID cases. They only want to preserve their ratings and their economy.”



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