

French COVID-19 deaths pass 150,000 as Omicron BA.5 subvariant erupts across Europe

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The upsurge of COVID-19 in France and across Europe is a catastrophe for which President Emmanuel Macron and fellow European governments are responsible. Having repealed all measures to limit the spread of the virus this spring, they have left the population defenseless against a new wave now infecting millions in France and tens of millions across Europe.

Of a population of 67.4 million, France has confirmed 32.1 million cases of COVID-19 over the course of the pandemic, including 19 million from last December to last March, and 2 million over just the last month. On Friday, cases in France had increased 45 percent over the previous seven days. Currently, France has 2 million confirmed active cases of COVID-19.

Despite the availability of life-saving vaccines, such a massive level of infection exacts a devastating toll. Over 25,000 people have died of COVID-19 so far this year in France, including 1,200 people in the past month, and on Sunday the death toll in the country surpassed 150,000, according to the Worldometer tracker. Recurring waves of mass infection are also leaving millions in France with life-altering Long COVID, which affects an estimated 10-30 percent of COVID-19 patients.

The current wave is driven by the highly infectious and immune-evading Omicron BA.5 subvariant, which accounted for 67 percent of cases in France in the last week of June. Infections are exploding across the country, with the seven-day average of daily new cases increasing more than eight-fold since June 12, from 14,561 to over 127,000.

Compared to previous Omicron subvariants, vaccines are less effective against BA.5, symptoms last longer at an average of 7-10 days, and one can be infectious for longer. In addition to these properties, BA.5 has been able to spread rapidly in France's highly vaccinated population, even though the country just experienced two recent waves of mass infection, due to the complete removal of social distancing guidelines and mask mandates.

France is, moreover, only the worst-hit country as COVID-19 explodes across Europe. Over the past month, the number of confirmed active COVID-19 cases have more than doubled to 1.7 million in Germany, 1.3 million in Italy, a half-million in Britain, and 130,000 in both the Netherlands and Belgium. Almost every country on the continent is experiencing a massive wave of infections that will soon rival that of the Omicron BA.1 surge last winter.

Due to a lack of testing and the prevalence of asymptomatic cases, the true total of COVID-19 infections is doubtless much higher than recorded in official figures. In Spain, where confirmed active cases per capita are five times lower than France, COVID-19 levels in Madrid wastewater are the highest since the pandemic began.

In France, official case totals are huge underestimates. Symptomatic individuals must pay for tests out of pocket, pushing them to get less reliable tests or forego testing altogether. The test positivity rate in the country is over 20 percent—well above the officially recommended 5 percent limit. Similar surges in test positivity rates can be seen across Europe.

High infection rates are translating to increased deaths across Europe, where deaths rose last week to 3,457. This was driven largely by increases in deaths in France, up 50 percent to 402, up 2 percent to 570 in Germany, up 81 percent to 581 in Spain, and up 36 percent to 578 in Italy. In the coming weeks, the number of fatalities will keep rising due to the delay between infection and the onset of serious illness.

Workers must be warned: The pandemic is set to continue indefinitely, at a devastating cost in lives and health, until the working class mobilizes internationally to compel the adoption of a Zero-COVID strategy to eliminate the coronavirus globally. This will involve a direct political struggle against reactionary capitalist governments in France and internationally.

Speculation by French officials that the emergence of the

Omicron variant would cause SARS-CoV-2 to become “endemic” and gradually melt away has proven utterly false.

Macron’s policy of making COVID-19 “endemic”—i.e., letting it spread at will—is leading to a high baseline level of infection that periodically surges to hit much of the population. The current surge is already the third this year in the country, the previous ones having peaked at 6.8 million active cases in late January, and 2.8 million active cases in mid-April. Over the last eight months, active COVID-19 cases in France never fell below 350,000.

As in previous waves, the French government’s response is to cynically demand “vigilance” while letting the virus spread unchecked. Recently installed Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne only mentioned COVID-19 briefly in her inaugural speech to the National Assembly on July 6, acknowledging that “the COVID epidemic is not over.” On TF1 television later that day, Borne called for “everyone to be vigilant” before refusing to reintroduce even the most basic measure to slow the spread of this airborne virus: compulsory masking in crowded indoor areas.

Epidemiology Professor Antoine Flahault bitterly criticized Borne in *Atlantico*, writing, “The government is happy today with a policy of ‘living with the virus,’ capitulating to the virus as have several other European capitals.” While vaccinations meant the Omicron variant proved five times less deadly than the Delta variant, he noted that Omicron’s vastly higher spread amid the ending of social distancing nearly canceled out the difference.

This book compiles the most critical programmatic statements, polemics, scientific analyses, interviews, and news articles published by the World Socialist Web Site on the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a social and political chronology of this world historic event based on a Marxist and Trotskyist perspective.

Nevertheless, Flahault noted that COVID-19 is “claiming 55,000-65,000 deaths each year in France. In August 2003, when a summer heat wave claimed 15,000 lives, state authorities and the population and media unanimously considered such a toll among the elderly unacceptable. Measures were taken to prevent more such tragedies in future summers. Now, COVID-19 deaths have been counted out each night for 2.5 years, but we reacted to this macabre toll by collectively covering our ears.”

The class interests underlying Macron’s infection policy were on display on July 7, as *Challenges* published its yearly ranking of France’s 500 richest individuals. In the first year of the pandemic, these billionaires and multimillionaires saw their collective wealth rise by 31 percent as they profited from multitrillion-euro bailouts and stepped-up exploitation of workers kept on the job without protections. This year,

their fortunes rose again, collectively rising above €1 trillion for the first time ever.

The recent successful suppression of a massive Omicron BA.2 outbreak in mainland China has once again shown that coordinated scientific policies can eliminate the virus in a few months. Adopted at a global level, they could end the pandemic.

Imposing such a policy will require an international offensive of the working class against the bourgeoisie and its middle class, pseudo-left defenders, like Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France. Mélenchon has played a key role in facilitating the Macron administration’s mass infection policy ever since the strict lockdown of May-March 2020, to which Macron was forced to agree as strikes spread across Europe amid the first wave of the pandemic.

In May 2020, even with case levels very low, when contact tracing and isolating cases could have eliminated the virus as in China and other Asia-Pacific countries, Mélenchon argued for keeping workers on the job amid mass deaths. Comparing the pandemic to World War I, he said: “We looked into the laws of 1915-16 to see what had been done. French society was a peasant society; all the men were at the front and were dying in the millions. We were interested to see how social cohesion was guaranteed at that time.”

Mélenchon indeed copied French social democratic chauvinists in World War I, who formed a so-called “Sacred Union” with far-right anti-Semitic groups like the *Action française* to back the war. Together with other leaders of his Unsubmissive France (LFI) party, like François Ruffin, he endorsed far-right protests last summer against vaccines and lockdowns initially called by neo-fascists like Marion Maréchal Le Pen and Florian Philippot.

A powerful movement is building in the working class, with strikes building across Europe and a revolutionary movement erupting among the workers in Sri Lanka that has toppled President Gotabhaya Rajapakse. Armed with a clear perspective and understanding of the pandemic, this movement can defeat all those forces working to perpetuate the mass infection policies that maintain the status quo for the capitalist elites. We encourage workers in France and across Europe to take up the fight for global elimination and participate in the Global Workers’ Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic.



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