

French universities reopen despite spread of coronavirus, new variants

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Last week French universities began to partially reopen to students. Following a tweet from French President Emmanuel Macron on January 21 announcing the partial reopening, new rules this term will allow each student to attend classes one day per week. Macron's tweet was made a day after a series of small student protests led by the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) and student unions called for the immediate reopening of universities on January 20.

The measure will throw hundreds of thousands of students back into classroom settings every day. For example, at just the University of Orléans, 4,000 students will return for in-person education each day. The risk of infection is not limited to the classroom. Students, professors and staff will increase the number of people on public transport and lead to unmasked, crowded lunches in cafeterias.

Even if strict protocols are followed, the virus will inevitably spread in an educational setting. This has been shown by multiple scientific studies. However, in all likelihood there will be a repeat of the September reopening of universities and schools, where supposedly strict rules will not be followed by most universities. Lectures will again take place in poorly ventilated rooms and halls without enough space for social distancing.

In current conditions the policy means a further acceleration in the spread of the virus, leading to more infections and deaths both among students and the wider population. Since the September reopening, nearly 50,000 people have died from COVID-19 in the country.

The relaxation of these measures comes as dangerous variants of the virus become further entrenched in France. On Thursday, Prime Minister Jean Castex reported that 14 percent of COVID-19 cases in the country already involved the more infectious B.1.1.7 variant, first identified in the UK. In France, an average of 419 people have died every day over the past week.

On Sunday, preliminary results from a study were published showing that the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine was significantly less effective against the South African variant. In some cases, the British variant has also developed the E484K mutation that is believed to cause the reduction in vaccine efficacy. The rollout of the AstraZeneca vaccine in France began on Saturday and is a key part of the government's vaccination campaign, which has still reached less than 3 percent of the population. The government is using the campaign for vaccines as a justification for its refusal to impose a lockdown until the population can be vaccinated and the virus stopped.

Contrary to the notion promoted by capitalist governments and the media, teenagers and young adults do get seriously ill from the disease. At the time of writing, 294 people aged under 30 are hospitalized with the virus, and 51 people in this age category have died from COVID-19 since the beginning of the pandemic. Health care workers treating patients with the British and South African variants have also emphasized that they are generally much younger than during the first wave.

Although undertaken in the name of defending students' mental health, the partial reopening of universities is a tactical step in the government's broader "herd immunity" policy. Macron has been pushing for a premature reopening of universities since the new year. On January 4, the Ministry of Higher Education decreed that certain groups of students could return in small groups and to sit for exams.

However, this met sharp resistance from students. For example, L2 students at Créteil University launched a petition against in-person exams. The petition stated: "The health crisis is far from over and is starting up again with the festive season and the arrival of a new strain of COVID is only making things worse. Doing exams in the classroom, given the current situation, is a dangerous

action for everyone's health."

Although just over a month later, this remains true, with the exam season finished and a new semester beginning. The university administrations, government and student unions have redoubled their efforts to push for a reopening.

The unions and pseudo-left parties bear central responsibility for creating the conditions for Macron to push through the reopening. It was only following a series of small protests organized by the NPA and a coalition of student unions on January 20 that Macron announced the measure.

The protest encompassed the youth organizations of the Greens, Jean-Luc Mélenchon's Unsubmissive France and Macron's own party, and was backed by the student unions. Only 1,500 protesters gathered in Paris and only a few hundred in other cities across France, yet these protests supposedly "pressured" Macron to implement his own right-wing policy. In contrast, when hundreds of thousands of "yellow vest" protesters demonstrated for months each week against social inequality and tax cuts for the rich, the president's response was police repression.

In fact, the current reopening has already been criticized among these layers as being too limited. On January 25, Maryam Pougetoux, the head of the National Union of French Students, pushed for even more anti-lockdown measures, stating, "We must go further, with levels of 50 percent [in-person]."

The claim that accelerating mass death and illness in society will improve the mental health of students is absurd. In fact, according to a recent survey by Odoxa-Backbone Consulting, 46 percent of students fear for their own health, and 80 percent fear for the health of their families.

Nonetheless, Macron, in a February 2 interview, claimed his policies aim to "protect our youth as much as possible."

A number of recent student suicides have underlined the mental health crisis engulfing youth both in France and internationally. While social isolation is a considerable huge strain on students, as well as the rest of society, it is not the underlying cause of the mental health crisis. The vast majority of youth face the specter of unemployment, and do not have access to adequate housing or food. A recent viral video of hundreds of students queuing for food parcels highlights the precarity facing French youth in the 21st century.

While the pandemic has compounded these issues,

during the last 12 months the billionaire class' wealth has rocketed. The youth face the brutal consequences of the European ruling class' conscious decision to let hundreds of thousands die, including among their family members and friends. Those of student age have grown up only seeing only austerity at home and imperialist war abroad.

Despite the anti-lockdown campaign of Macron and the pseudo-left parties, there is not popular support for reopening universities among the population or the student body. The handful of students gathered by the student union-NPA protest stands in stark contrast to tens of thousands who have demonstrated against Macron's recent police-state measures: the anti-Muslim Law Affirming Republican Principles and the Global Security Law. A recent poll showed that 70 percent of the French population stated they supported a new lockdown to stop the spread of the virus.

These protests were an effort to divert anger over the social crisis, poor housing, food insecurity and the mental health crisis behind a campaign for an end to lockdown measures. In doing so, they are functioning as the political cheerleaders for a policy aimed at sacrificing tens of thousands of lives for the profits of the corporate and financial elite. The campaign for a "reopening" is aimed at preventing any impact of a lockdown on corporate profits, and keeping schools open is necessary in order that children's parents can continue to go to work.

The return to in-person instruction at the universities is a useful tool to increase pressure on schoolteachers to maintain in-person education. It also provides a precedent for the reopening of non-essential enterprise, including restaurants and hospitality venues.

Students and young people must not allow themselves to be used as pawns in the government's efforts to pursue homicidal policy. Schools, universities and non-essential workplaces must be closed, and a comfortable living wage must be provided to the entire population, young and old. To fight for this program, students should turn to the working class, the only social force capable of imposing a scientific response to the pandemic. The fight against the policy of death is the fight against capitalism and for socialism.



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