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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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29.12.2021

French government rejects lockdown as COVID-19 cases skyrocket past 100,000

French Prime Minister Jean Castex and Health Minister Olivier Véran delivered a joint press conference yesterday evening in response to skyrocketing COVID-19 cases in France and internationally, propelled by the Omicron variant. They made clear that despite the record and rapidly rising case numbers, the Macron government's policy of rejecting lockdowns and social distancing measures would be maintained.

The seven-day average of coronavirus cases is now at over 70,000, almost 50 percent higher than the previous high in November 2020. More than 104,000 cases were recorded on Christmas Day, equivalent to approximately half a million cases in the United States in a single day. More than 16,000 people are currently hospitalised, 3,299 of them in intensive care. The Pasteur Institute has warned that at current trends, hospitalisations will reach 1,000 per day by the beginning of January, with more than 250 new intensive care patients a day.

Castex and Véran themselves described a situation of the utmost urgency and danger. "What we have observed for the past three weeks, notably in Britain and Denmark, justifies at once prudence and vigilance," said Castex. "If we do not yet see at this stage the same hospital levels tied to Omicron, the strong contagiousness, the speed at which it propagates, must lead us beyond" promotion of vaccination.



French President Emmanuel Macron. (Ludovic Marin, Pool via AP)

“We are faced with two simultaneous waves,” said Véran. Omicron “is circulating so quickly that, unlike the previous variants, we do not have enough delay in relation to the countries that have been hit before us to have a full understanding of the impact of the variant. The variant is spreading travelling the entire planet. Spain and Italy, which were relatively spared by the Delta variant, are experiencing epidemic spikes dwarfing what they have seen since the beginning of the pandemic.”

Véran added that an “unknown is: Can Omicron be stopped by completely classic measures, such as those that have been put in place in our country so far? To this point, Denmark which has put in place some measures, has not recorded a breaking impact on the epidemiological dynamic because Omicron is so contagious that besides a completely general lockdown, nothing seems capable of blocking its path.”

In other words, the government openly states that only a lockdown policy, similar to that adopted in March 2020, involving the closure of schools and non-essential production, would be able to prevent the spread of the Omicron variant. Yet it has rejected these measures out of hand.

In fact, the government’s announcements involve a significant *loosening* of restrictions. Predicting an explosion of cases, it is reducing or eliminating the period of mandatory isolation for positive and contact cases. “We are going to adjust our doctrine on the period of isolation,” Castex stated. “We will fix these new rules by the end of the week.” According to FranceInfo, contact cases will have no period of mandatory isolation if they

are fully vaccinated, compared to seven days at present, despite the fact that they can catch and transmit the disease. Positive cases will reportedly be required to isolate for seven days, not 10.

Castex announced only that indoor gatherings would be limited to 2,000 people, that patrons in bars and cafes must be seated and not standing, and that “where it is possible” employees are to switch to working from home for three days per week. Masks are to be made mandatory outdoors in larger cities.

Castex and Véran presented the response to the coronavirus as almost exclusively based on the expansion of third booster vaccine doses throughout the population. The “health pass,” which previously could be satisfied by a negative test, will now only be satisfied by a complete vaccination schedule. Vaccines are also being extended to children aged 5–12.

Even if it were the case that vaccination provided a guarantee to not catch and transmit the virus (which it does not), the government’s own timeline makes clear that its policy is predicated on an unprecedented surge of cases and mass death. More than 20 percent of the population is currently totally unvaccinated, while only just over 22 million people have received a third booster dose, less than one-third of the French population. It is established that two vaccine doses provide insufficient protection against the Omicron variant.

Moreover, a policy of vaccination alone is incapable of preventing the continued spread of the virus and the flooding and breakdown of hospital systems and deaths on a mass scale.

The government’s focus on vaccination is driven solely by corporate profit interests. Shutting down of non-essential production and switching to online learning are rejected because these measures would involve a reduction in corporate profits.

That is why Véran announced that the government would not postpone the reopening of schools after the Christmas break, despite a skyrocketing of cases among children, with more than 190 currently hospitalised and 35 in intensive care. While the incidence rate nationally is at almost 700, it is at more than 900 among children.

His comments were aimed at cutting across growing calls from medical professionals for the closure of schools to protect children and prevent schools from functioning as

transmission vectors for the pandemic. On Sunday, the *Journal du Dimanche* published an open letter by more than 50 medical professionals demanding the postponing of the school reopening.

“Since the beginning of November,” they write, “more than 300,000 children and adolescents have tested positive to COVID-19. The hospitalisation of children in regular and intensive care have surpassed the peaks of all the precedent waves, with more than 800 children under 10 and 300 adolescents from 10–19 hospitalised in six weeks, and these figures continue to rise.”

“We are anticipating an unprecedented wave in the weeks to come with incoming patients of children hit by multisystem inflammatory syndrome, and other consequences tied, in certain cases, to Long COVID.”

They noted that recent studies showed that “the virus circulates more in school establishments, in primary as in secondary, than in the community over the same period, showing that contacts in schools increase the potential transmission of the virus for the community. In numerous departments, the epidemic acceleration clearly began in the autumn with clusters in school settings. One of the first clusters of the Omicron variant was in a school setting... We note a suffocation of pediatric hospital services, a marked tension in hospitals and an increase in cases in city medical clinics.”

The Macron government is determined to proceed with a policy of mass infection and social murder in order to protect the interests of the corporate and financial elite. The working class must intervene independently and fight for a scientific response to the pandemic, for the international elimination of COVID-19. Schools and non-essential production should be temporarily closed, with full payments provided to workers and small businesses impacted, and massive resources allocated to online learning so that every child has a comfortable environment in which to learn, while vaccines can be provided freely to all of humanity.

The development of such a policy requires a political struggle to organize the working class independently of the union bureaucracies and establishment parties, in a struggle for socialism against the subordination of the lives of billions of people on an international scale to the profit interests of a tiny financial elite.

World Socialist 28.12.2021