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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

Jacques Valentin, Alex Lantier
01.01.2022

Scientists denounce French government's inaction amid Omicron wave

The health policy imposed by President Emmanuel Macron this week, relying all but exclusively on vaccines to deal with a tsunami of Omicron cases, has provoked bitter criticisms from scientists. Rejecting calls to delay the return to school and stop physical contact in non-essential workplaces, the French government's policy is preparing a tidal wave of illness and death.



Shoppers wearing face masks to protect against COVID-19 walk along the Grand Bouvard in Paris, Monday, Dec. 20, 2021. (AP Photo/Michel Euler)

The denunciations of Macron's policies by well-respected scientists who are leaders in their fields underscore the necessity to mobilize the working class to impose, over the

resistance of an utterly irresponsible ruling class, a scientific public health policy to eliminate the virus. The policy currently followed in France and across Europe is leading straight to disaster. Yesterday, France recorded a new record of 206,243 cases of COVID-19, as did the United Kingdom (189,213), Spain (161,688) and Italy (126,688).

The speculation that the French government uses to justify its policy of mass infection has no foundation in science. “Besides a generalized lockdown, nothing seems likely to halt the spread” of the Omicron variant, Health Minister Olivier Véran admitted at a December 27 press conference. Yet Véran and Prime Minister Jean Castex rejected any idea of a lockdown, and Véran insisted that now that vaccines are available, there would most likely be no “correlation” between the number of infections and the number of hospitalizations and deaths from COVID-19.

In fact, everything indicates that the tidal wave of Omicron cases is preparing a corresponding explosion of illness and death in the coming days. In London, the European epicenter of the spread of the Omicron variant, overflowing hospitals are preparing to house their COVID-19 patients in tents erected in parking lots and gardens.

Epidemiologist and biostatistician Dominique Castagliola, emeritus researcher at France’s National Institute of Health and Medical Research (INSERM), denounced Macron for playing with the French people’s lives amid the Omicron surge: “We could have slowed its spread if we had acted, taking precautions. On the contrary, we decided to play Russian roulette and hope for the best, but that is no way to formulate a public health policy.”

Demanding that French health staff have access to N95 masks, which protect better than surgical masks, Castagliola also denounced the state’s utter disregard for school youth. She declared: “The policy for handling COVID in the schools is empty, no concrete measure has been announced. What health professionals were demanding was to leave schools closed in early January to give some time to try to put in place necessary equipment (aeration of schools, N95 masks for teaching staff, and so on).”

The situation in universities is similarly catastrophic. Whereas many students are sick or have been exposed to infected classmates, and incidence rates are surging in the 20–29 age bracket, exams will be held in person in January, which will accelerate the spread of the virus.

Castagliola added that “given the staggering incidence rates in the worst-hit regions, such as the French Riviera and the Paris metropolitan area, we should be in a Stage 4 alert, with distance learning in junior and senior high schools.” She also denounced Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer’s handling of health protocols in the schools, noting that “the rules are constantly changing.”

She concluded by warning: “How high will the wave go, what will be its severity? We are going to find out. ... As for the consequences in the hospitals, we will see them in seven to ten days.”

In fact, hospitalizations have mounted without interruption in France since October. Currently, COVID-19 patients occupy 18,321 hospital beds including 3,506 intensive care beds. Intensive care units are 69.3 percent full; they are beyond full saturation in the French Riviera and Corsica and are fast approaching it in the Alps, Burgundy, and the Paris metropolitan area. The number of weekly deaths in France crossed above 1,000 last week and is continuing to mount.

The entire ruling class supports Macron’s policy of mass infection, despite rising concern about the shifts in public opinion that will flow from the acceleration of mass death that it has set into motion. Thus, *Le Monde* wrote that Macron “has decided to play to the very end the tight-rope act he has performed on the COVID-19 pandemic.” Nonetheless, in major media and in the political establishment, there is unanimous support for a rejection of the necessary measures like lockdowns and social distancing that could undermine profits of the major financial markets.

Growing numbers of scientists, however, are echoing Castagliola’s unambiguous denunciation of Macron’s essentially criminal policy. “The economy won out over health. It is a choice,” briefly commented Professor Jean-Paul Stahl, a specialist of infectious diseases, on BFM-TV.

The social distancing measures that can eliminate the circulation of the virus are well known to scientists. They are strict lockdowns to drastically reduce the number of cases, followed by vaccination, contact tracing and isolation of the sick. These policies were followed in China, allowing a country of 1.4 billion inhabitants to record only two deaths

from COVID-19 in 2021, while Europe with around 700 million people suffered 1 million deaths in the same period.

Putting these measures into practice, however, necessitates the collective mobilization of the population and of vast industrial and financial resources. Workers and small businesses must receive full state financial support during the time they cannot work. It is clear that employing such policies, like the health policies recommended by scientists, requires smashing the obstacle posed by the financial aristocracy and its political servants, like Macron, who place profits over lives.

Indeed, on December 9, France's Scientific Council pointed to worrying cases of transmission of the Omicron variant among doubly vaccinated people in large gatherings. The council declared: "In an approach of collective solidarity, the most effective response, given the current state of scientific knowledge, consists of immediately giving up on any collective gatherings in closed spaces where masks cannot be worn or are not appropriate, and in particular any gatherings where food and drink are consumed."

Macron predictably trampled underfoot the advice of his own Scientific Council, which aimed to close bars and restaurants during the holidays.

On Twitter, Professor Rémi Salomon of the Paris Public Hospitals wrote: "Vaccination is essential to halt the virus, but it is not sufficient. More than ever, everyone must clearly understand the necessity, even for the vaccinated, of limiting one's contacts with others." He called to "not gather in closed spaces; aerate closed spaces more; avoid meals, cafés and drinks involving multiple contacts; use N95 masks in case of risk; test yourself before risky situations, like meals."

Such recommendations cannot be adopted on an individual basis: it is impossible for most workers at work, and youth in schools, to follow them.

Only the working class can impose scientific policies necessary to eliminate the virus, by a mass political mobilization against the Macron government. The Socialist Equality Party (France), its European and international sister parties, and its Internet publication, the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS), call to form rank-and-file safety committees in

workplaces, schools and neighborhoods. We encourage WSWS readers wanting to fight to build such committees to contact us.

World Socialist 31.12.2021