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French unions try to demobilize teachers strike vs. mass COVID-19 infections

Teachers marched in cities across France yesterday, a week after a widely followed nationwide teachers' strike against President Emmanuel Macron's policies of mass infection on COVID-19. The strike, which rallied fewer teachers than a week earlier, reflected far broader popular opposition to the eruption of Omicron cases in France and advanced calls for Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer to resign.



Teachers gather during a protest in Lille, northern France, Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022. French teachers have walked out in a nationwide strike Thursday to express anger at the way the government is handling the virus situation in schools, denouncing confusing rules and calling for remote learning. (AP Photo/Michel Spingler)

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The strike took place amid a disastrous health situation, with nearly a half-million daily infections for three straight days in France. The number of currently active COVID-19 cases in France is nearing 6 million, or 9 percent of the population, with children particularly hard hit. At the same time, however, Prime Minister Jean Castex and Health Minister Olivier Véran gave a speech announcing the lifting of virtually every remaining public health measure to halt the spread of COVID-19, making crystal clear their support for a policy of mass infection.

On January 13, over 75 percent of schoolteachers struck, according to union figures, and half of schools were closed, and around 78,500 teachers marched in the streets, according to police. On January 20, the strike mobilized only 1.15 percent of primary and 2.18 percent of secondary school teachers, according to Education Ministry figures. After threatening not to allow the teachers' march in Paris to proceed, Paris police prefect Didier Lallement relented and told the unions the march would be "tolerated."

The fall in teachers' participation in the strike does not reflect any greater acceptance by workers, in France or internationally, of policies of mass infection. Indeed, strikes and school protests are intensifying in the United States, in Greece and beyond against a policy that is leading to millions of new cases of the deadly virus every day. However, it does reflect the impossibility of mobilizing opposition to policies of mass infection under the leaden grip of national trade union bureaucracies.

Not only did the French unions demoralize teachers after the January 13 strike by immediately agreeing to Blanquer's response to the strike—a promise of 5 million N95 masks for kindergarten teachers and extra funds for the hiring of substitute teachers. They also loudly proclaimed yesterday that while they had called a strike action, they were not encouraging teachers to participate in it.

Guislaine David, the general secretary of the SNUIPP-FSU (United National Union of Primary, Junior and High School Teachers-United Union Federation), baldly told AFP: "The goal was not this time to call on teachers to strike, because only a week after the previous one, that is hard. The idea today is to keep up the pressure with local mobilizations, before launching a new strike call for January 27."

In Marseille, FSU official Caroline Chavet said: “For the time being, what we are seeing are diverse initiatives that are emerging in the different educational establishments, each doing things on a scale that suits them. The most important thing is that teachers should talk amongst themselves. We must convince ourselves to arrive united for a strike on January 27.”

This stunningly complacent approach reflects the utter indifference of broad sections of the union bureaucracy, in France and beyond, to the course of the pandemic. Every week, well over 1,000 people die of COVID-19 in France and 20,000 in Europe, while millions are infected, including children, with a virus whose long-term health impacts are still not well known. Yet the union bureaucracies are as indifferent to the spread of COVID-19 as the Macron government, proposing not to halt the contagion, but that teachers “talk amongst themselves.”

The unions thus organized various acts of political theater outside schools and state buildings. A few dozen people wearing swimsuits and masks of Blanquer’s face danced in front of the Education Ministry and held a sign saying: “A meeting on health protocols is underway, do not disturb the health minister.” Riot police units then forced them to leave the area.

Indeed, Blanquer provoked outrage among teachers after *Médiapart* revealed that he had phoned in the new year’s health guidelines, which he revealed the night before classes started in an interview to *Le Parisien*, while vacationing in Ibiza. An anonymous source told France Info that Macron “did not appreciate” Blanquer’s action, and that the education minister could be sacked.

In reality, Blanquer’s contempt and disrespect for his own job is only a particularly obnoxious expression of the entire Macron government’s enthusiastic implementation of policies designed to massively spread the coronavirus through the French population.

At last night’s press conference, Castex and V éran announced a series of measures that effectively end any public pretense by the Macron government that it is trying to prevent contagion.

A “vaccine pass” certifying vaccination status will be required for theaters, stadiums and to travel on airplanes and trains, and booster doses will be opened to adolescents aged 12 to 17. However, the government will end recommendations to employers to promote telecommuting; reopen stadiums, discos, and theaters without restrictions; and end outdoor masking mandates next month. There will be as-yet-unspecified “lightening” of pandemic protocols in the schools in February or early March.

The French union bureaucracies cannot oppose such a policy. Their role is to market to workers policies decided by the state and the financial–corporate oligarchy, and their own budgets are made up largely of corporate subsidies whose maintenance depends on the free flow of profits into the coffers of France’s largest enterprises. Strikes they called and then sold out have led in recent years to the imposition of cuts to pensions, rail-workers’ salaries, unemployment insurance that they had negotiated with Macron.

Today, however, it is not only the living standards but the very lives and health of billions of workers around the world that the unions are signing away. They are no doubt just as terrified as Macron by the international wave of opposition by teachers and workers to sending children into unsafe schools. Their aim is not to lead a struggle, but to prevent struggles from erupting that would totally escape their control.

To stop the pandemic and oppose policies of mass infection, workers must take the struggle out of the hands of national union bureaucracies. Strikes and protests are mounting in numerous US cities including Chicago, San Francisco, New York and Boston, as well as in Greece, while advocates for safe schools like Lisa Diaz in Great Britain are fighting slander campaigns in corporate media. And explosive anger is mounting in workplaces around the world against mass infection policies and inflation that is slashing workers’ real wages.

The way forward is an international struggle to build rank-and-file committees, independent of the union bureaucracies, to coordinate strikes and other actions to impose a scientific health policy and eliminate transmission of the coronavirus. This requires a strict lockdown policy, the end of in-person schooling, and the pursuit of a Zero Covid policy—with full financial support for workers and small businesses affected.

The *Parti de l'égalité socialiste* calls upon teachers, youth and workers who want to build such organizations in their countries and stop the pandemic to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* and fight to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

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