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European states dither on emergency response as coronavirus spreads globally

The total number of coronavirus cases worldwide rose past 100,000 yesterday, after a week that has seen a surge in detected cases in Iran and Europe.

While the epicenter of the pandemic remains China, with 80,576 cases including 3,042 deaths, the number of new cases there is plunging, as contact tracing of infected patients, quarantines and the building of a massive fever hospital network have slashed the spread of the virus. Over two-thirds of China's surviving cases (53,929) have now recovered. However, particularly in Europe and in Iran, whose medical system has been devastated by vindictive US-European sanctions, the epidemic is escalating out of control.

Yesterday Iran discovered 1,234 new cases, bringing its total number of cases to 4,747, and announced the closure of schools and universities until March 20 and the setting up of checkpoints on highways to stop traffic between major cities.

In Europe, Italy announced 778 new cases and 49 deaths yesterday for 4,636 cases and 197 deaths. Germany added 125 new cases to reach 670; France added 230 to reach 653 with nine deaths; Spain added 119 cases to reach 401 with six deaths; and Britain added 48 cases to reach 164 with two deaths. There are major clusters of the disease in the Lombardy, Veneto, and Emilio Romagna regions of Italy; North Rhine-Westphalia, Bavaria, and Baden-Wurttemberg in Germany; the Oise, Savoie and Bas-Rhin in France; and Madrid, the Basque country, and Valencia in Spain.

It is urgent to halt the spread of this deadly disease. If illness totals in European countries continue to grow exponentially at current rates of 30 percent or more daily, it would take

around one month for the disease totals in each of the larger European countries to reach into the millions—flooding hospital systems with hundreds of thousands of critically ill patients.

The principal obstacle to the detection and isolation of the disease is the right-wing, nationalist and criminally negligent policy of the European governments. Committed to austerity that has devastated health and social services over decades and funneled massive resources to the superrich, they refuse to dedicate the necessary social resources to trace, treat, and halt the spread of the illness. The critical question is mobilizing the working class to ensure the rational, internationally-coordinated use of social wealth created by the workers to treat the sick.

While the European Central Bank and the Bank of England have together pumped the equivalent of trillions of euros into the banks since the 2008 Wall Street crash, the financial aristocracy has gutted health spending and hospital capacity across Europe. The number of hospital beds has fallen from nearly 700,000 in 1991 to less than 500,000 in 2017 in Germany, and France has lost 17,500 hospital beds, or 5.3 percent of the total, since 2013. Spain had fewer than 95,000 public hospital beds available in 2016.

In Britain, 17,230 hospital beds have been cut from the only 144,455 that existed in 2010. Even before the coronavirus epidemic, this drew a warning from Simon Stevens, the head of the National Health Service (NHS) in England, that Britain urgently needed to increase hospital capacity.

On Thursday, World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus felt he had to criticize the advanced countries for not acting decisively enough against the epidemic.

“We are concerned that some countries have either not taken this seriously enough, or have decided there is nothing they can do,” he explained, adding, “We are preoccupied with the fact that in certain countries the level of political engagement and action does not correspond with the level of the threat. ... Even high-income countries should expect surprises, the solution is to prepare in an aggressive manner. We don’t think that containment should be abandoned. Don’t give up, don’t surrender, use a comprehensive approach.”

Yesterday’s European health ministers summit in Paris only illustrated the WHO’s concerns. The ministers clashed over the refusal of France and Germany to export key medical supplies like gloves and masks, making it impossible to pool resources in a

common fight against the disease. The European Union (EU) also increased its research funding on coronavirus by a paltry \$42 million, though hundreds of billions of euros of investment are needed to build up the necessary research, productive capacity and treatment capacity to come to grips with the disease.

In effect, each individual country is going its own way, implementing ineffective and totally inadequate national policies, as the coronavirus spreads and kills across national borders.

Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte's government closed schools and universities for 10 days starting Thursday. However, the WHO's Italian government advisor, Walter Ricciardi, called the measure "useless and harmful," as the schools would be closed less than the coronavirus's 14-day incubation period. This means that youth who have caught the disease recently could stay at home for 10 days without showing symptoms, and then return to school, infecting more of their classmates before it is obvious that they are ill.

There are already reports that in Lombardy, Italy's worst-hit region, coronavirus patients cannot find doctors to visit them—either because doctors are themselves ill, or because they cannot find protective equipment to wear to safely examine their patients.

On Thursday night, French President Emmanuel Macron fatalistically declared at an emergency meeting that an epidemic is "inexorable." French health authorities said they were considering a shutdown of schools, universities, and public transportation to better track the disease.

While visiting a retirement home yesterday, however, Macron countermanded them, criticizing emergency measures and insisting with criminal light-mindedness that everyone should get used to a coronavirus epidemic, which he downplayed, comparing it to the common flu. "In any case, the epidemic will be there," Macron said, calling for people "not to abandon common sense. ... Each year we deal with influenza epidemics that unfortunately kill 9,000 to 10,000 patients." This is profoundly false, as the coronavirus is far more contagious and at least 20 times deadlier than the flu.

However, Macron said there should be no extra spending or moves to slow the spread of the disease. "We must be able to hold. If we take measures that are too drastic, it will not be sustainable in the long run." Despite mounting public concern, he claimed that shutting schools or workplaces would only "create panic."

In Britain, a second coronavirus death was recorded of an elderly man who was not quarantined when he arrived in hospital in Milton Keynes with severe symptoms, but who asphyxiated after his oxygen mask was removed. Moreover, authorities announced that patients with a mild coronavirus illness will be asked to stay home, in order to relieve pressure on hospitals—though they will then be more likely to spread the disease to their family or flatmates.

Several reports have emerged from Germany of the impossibility of obtaining coronavirus testing, even for manifestly ill and disoriented feverish patients, or—in the case of journalist Juan Moreno, who was ordered to report on the Italian outbreak—for those who had traveled to epidemic zones.

Such events only underscore that a massive investment in coronavirus testing, production of protective clothing and respirator equipment, and expanding hospital capacity can overcome the destructive and dangerous legacy of decades of European Union austerity. The resources exist for universal testing, paid sick leave for the infected, free high-quality treatment for all, and the creation of safe living and working conditions. However, they require international coordination and collaboration, and the independent mobilization of the working class to oversee conditions at home and on the job.

The accelerating pandemic in Europe undeniably demonstrates the failure of the banks and the capitalist class to deal with life-and-death threats facing humanity and the necessity for the socialist reorganization of society.

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