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By Alex Lantier
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Going into lockdown, Europe overtakes China as coronavirus epicenter

Yesterday, as confinement orders ordering the population to stay at home went into effect in Spain and France after first being announced in Italy last week, and as Berlin closed schools, shops and public gathering places across Germany, the coronavirus continued to surge across Europe. Europe has emerged—for now, as the number of cases in America and Africa is also rising rapidly—as the center of the global pandemic, exposing the fragile state of hospital and social infrastructure devastated by decades of European Union (EU) austerity.

There was an increase of 10,177 detected cases yesterday across Europe, bringing the total number of cases across the continent to at least 73,730. With nearly all these cases still under treatment or observation, Europe now contains most of the 98,219 active cases worldwide. The most new cases were detected in the pandemic's European epicenter, Italy (3,526 new cases), then Germany (2,080+), Spain (1,467+), France (1,097+) and Great Britain (407+). Deaths also mounted: 345 in Italy, 168 in Spain, 27 in France, 19 in the Netherlands, 16 in Britain, and seven in Germany.

What has emerged over the last three months is the abject failure of European authorities to react promptly, warn the public of the seriousness of the disease, coordinate the necessary containment and treatment measures, and halt the spread of coronavirus.



Police officers and soldiers check passengers leaving from Milan main train station, Italy, Monday, March 9, 2020. (Claudio Furlan/LaPresse via AP)

A stark contrast emerges with countries in Asia, like China and Singapore, where health authorities acted more consistently to order quarantines to limit the spread of the disease, test the population, and identify and treat the sick, thus stopping the exponential spread of the virus.

At current rates of spread, Europe is set to overtake today the number of coronavirus patients in China, the pandemic's original epicenter, where its spread is almost halted. In China, 68,715 of the 80,881 total patients have now recovered; 3,226 (four percent) have died; and at most a few dozen new cases are discovered each day. But while Europe has less than half of China's population, it had nearly as many cases yesterday, and more people have died in Europe (3,401) than in China of coronavirus.

A far higher proportion of Europe's than of China's population has contracted the disease, so that the impact on overstretched and underfunded European health care systems will be greater. While 56.2 of every million Chinese people have coronavirus, 112 per million Germans, 118 per million Frenchmen, 244 per million Spaniards, 270 per million Norwegians, 317 per million Swiss and 521 per million Italians have the disease.

Given the virus's long incubation period of up to 14 days, when the sick show no symptoms but can infect others, confinement measures adopted in Italy, Spain, France and parts of North Rhine-Westphalia in Germany will not immediately stop the spread. One must expect that many recently infected people now confined at home will, sometime in the next two weeks, begin showing symptoms. That is, even in the portions of Europe

where the most draconian measures are being taken, a many-fold rise in the number of infected must still be feared.

With 0.05 percent of Italy's population infected, hospitals in the hardest-hit north are already swamped with more critically ill pneumonia patients than ventilators to treat them, leaving doctors the barbaric choice of deciding which patients they will try to save and which they will leave to die. The fatality rate in Italy has thus shot up to eight percent. Moreover, hospitals in other badly hit regions in Europe, including Alsace in France, have said they may also soon ration care if they cannot transfer critical coronavirus cases to other areas.

Dr. Fabiano di Marco, who worked at a hospital in Bergamo, one of Italy's hardest hit cities, but is now himself infected, said, "Beds are not infinite, and they are often given not to the most serious cases, but to people with the best chance of survival. Lombardy has 1,100 intensive care beds, and about 900 are now taken up by virus cases. We are facing very difficult choices... That alone creates stress for doctors, as does losing patients, who are often relatives or acquaintances of staff."

He warned, "Don't underestimate this virus... It won't be doctors and ventilators that stop it, it will be our ability to reduce contact." He added, "To stop this thing there are no half-measures. You either do all or nothing. If you do nothing, you will have hundreds of thousands of deaths... Unfortunately I can see the rest of the world still using half-measures."

The coronavirus has starkly brought out the class gulf separating workers from the ruling class. With staggering contempt for human life, representatives of the capitalist class called on workers to accept that tens of millions should get the virus while doing nothing to stop the pandemic.

While German Chancellor Angela Merkel callously advised the public to prepare for 60 to 70 percent of Germans getting the disease, UK scientific adviser Sir Patrick Vallance said it was "not desirable" to stop 60 percent of Britons from catching coronavirus. He gave the fascistic argument that a mass infection was desirable, to give "some immunity" to survivors—without requiring the financial aristocracy to part with any of its billions. Top French officials repeatedly tried to put workers to sleep, comparing coronavirus to the seasonal flu.

While fascistic ravings prevailed in top state circles, precious weeks were lost, in which no coordinated action was taken to isolate the European population and prevent the spread of the virus.

The eruption of anger among workers internationally last week—with wildcat strikes in plants across Italy, and of Canadian autoworkers, UK postal workers and French bus drivers—compelled a shift in state policy. First, Rome, then Madrid and Paris took measures to confine the population, faced with warnings by scientific advisers of hundreds of thousands or millions of deaths.

It is critical for the working class to consciously mount a response to the pandemic that is politically independent from the capitalists, whose policies will only create more disasters for the workers. The EU powers' haphazard, nationalist and uncoordinated response to the pandemic, based on their virulent hostility and contempt for the working class, must be opposed.

Mass layoffs are already going into effect. Among airlines, SAS has announced 10,000 layoffs, Norwegian Air 7,300 (90 percent of its workforce), British Airways parent company IAG will slash 75 percent of its flights, Air France-KLM 70 to 90 percent, and Lufthansa up to 90 percent. Among automakers, France's PSA has shut all its European operations; Renault has closed facilities in Spain; and Volkswagen is shutting down several production lines as plant shutdowns in Italy and Spain cut its supply chains.

With millions of students and self-employed workers across Europe dependent on the service sector and tourism, which are collapsing, the potential loss of income for working people is enormous.

While the European Central Bank has pumped 120 billion euros into the financial markets, and EU governments are pledging hundreds of billions of euros to avert corporate bankruptcies, workers are receiving only a patchwork of offers of state-funded layoffs involving massive pay cuts. Nor have any EU governments launched programs to build hospitals and medical equipment, or carry out massive coronavirus testing, as in South Korea and China. Instead, hundreds of thousands of soldiers and riot police are taking to Europe's streets to enforce confinement orders as anger mounts among workers and tens of thousands struggle to get care.

It is critical for workers across Europe and internationally to organize themselves in committees of action, independent of the corporate-controlled trade unions, to fight for socialist policies. These include the immediate closure of all schools and workplaces not

essential to the fight against the pandemic, with full pay for affected workers; universal testing and free treatment for the disease; an emergency program to build new health infrastructure; and an end to sanctions, border closings and trade war measures that block a unified, international struggle against the virus.

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