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Europe's coronavirus death toll passes 10,000

More than 10,000 people have been killed by coronavirus across the European continent. The gruesome milestone has been reached just five weeks after the first death was recorded on the continent, in France, on February 15.

With yesterday's 1,414 new deaths, the total for the entire continent reached 10,220 deaths from 192,663 cases. Among the European Union's 27 countries, 9,720 deaths have been recorded from 172,407 cases.



Members of Military Emergency Unit arrive at Abando train station, in Bilbao, northern Spain, Monday, March 23, 2020. (AP Photo/Alvaro Barrientos)

In Italy, 601 new fatalities brought the total to 6,077 deaths. Almost 5,000 new cases of the virus were reported. Many more lives are threatened even before these new cases, with

50,418 active cases and 3,204 classed as “serious, critical.” All told, 63,927 people have been infected in Italy.

In Spain, the death toll reached 2,206, with 434 new deaths reported, up from 391 the previous day. There were 4,321 new cases, making for a total of 27,528 active cases. Some 2,355 are classified as “serious, critical.”

The inability of health and social care services across Europe to cope with the destructive impact of the virus—after decades of being underfunded, privatised and de-staffed—resulted in soldiers, drafted to disinfect and run residential homes in Spain, finding elderly people dead in their beds, abandoned to their fate with the country under a strict lockdown.

In France, there were 186 new deaths, an increase over the previous day’s 112, bringing the total to 860. The deaths included another two medics, one a GP and the other a gynaecologist. There are over 13,000 active cases in the country, 8,675 people in hospital and 2,082 people in critical condition.

A further 34 people perished in the Netherlands, bringing the total to 213, and 24 people died in Germany, bringing fatalities to 118.

In the UK, after it was announced that 54 more people had died, and 335 in total, Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced a lockdown of the country Monday evening. People can leave their homes only for “very limited purposes,” including “shopping for basic necessities, as infrequently as possible” and “one form of exercise a day.” Only two people can be together, unless they live in the same household. Police can enforce the lockdown, “including through fines and dispersing gatherings,” said Johnson.

The Foreign Office advised the up to one million Britons on holiday or on business trips abroad to return to the UK immediately. They warned that otherwise there would likely be no more commercial flights available, with air routes likely shutting without warning Tuesday and Wednesday.

Johnson’s government has refused to take a number of critical measures to stop the spread of the virus. Its original plan, before being forced to retreat, was to allow the mass infection of the population, supposedly to achieve “herd immunity.” The government still advises all who suspect they have the virus not to seek treatment in hospital, but to “self-isolate” at home—without being tested.

More evidence is emerging that those who are contracting the virus and in some cases dying are from many age ranges, including younger, fitter people, from a baby who was born with the virus to a group of three 30-year-old junior doctors in the same UK hospital who were diagnosed Sunday and required ventilators.

In response, the ruling elite is putting into operation draconian attacks on civil liberties that set a dangerous precedent, while providing no real medical assistance.

Yesterday, the Johnson government was able to pass all stages in the House of Commons of the Emergency Coronavirus Bill, under which he and his ministers are granted **extraordinary authoritarian powers**, including banning any assembly of people, at any time and place.

This week, Hungary's parliament will hear a bill under which far-right prime minister Viktor Orbán is set to receive dictatorial powers enabling him to rule by decree. The powers provide no defined cut-off date and include imprisoning those deemed to be spreading "fake news" for prison terms of up to five years.

No government in Europe or internationally is carrying out the mass testing required to successfully quarantine and then treat those infected, who may not be showing symptoms but who are still spreading COVID-19. Even front-line medical staff are not being tested. Due to health service cuts, there is hopelessly inadequate provision of basic medical facilities, including ventilators and personal protective equipment (PPE) for staff.

In contrast, the banks, corporations and super-rich are being granted bailouts that eclipse those granted to the bankers and financial institutions after the 2008 global financial crash. In recent days, Germany, France, Britain and Spain have announced massive subventions to big business, under conditions in which millions of workers have already been laid off, with only those in essential services now employed in most European countries.

Well over a trillion euros have been made available in a matter of days to prop up the financial aristocracy and corporate billionaires. Chancellor Angela Merkel's government has made available a package worth around €750 billion to protect Germany's banks and major corporations. Emmanuel Macron's French government committed €300 billion and Johnson's Chancellor Rishi Sunak £350 billion.

Spain's Socialist Party Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez has committed \$219 billion to the corporations, including €100 billion of guarantees for company loans. A further €17 billion of direct support for enterprises is available and €83 billion is reportedly being reserved for private sector investment.

These handouts represent a gigantic raid on the public purse for the second time in a decade. Germany's bailout is the equivalent of 20.5 percent of GDP, Spain's, 15.6 percent and the UK's, 15 percent.

These bailouts followed the lead of the European Central Bank, which last week announced a €750 billion new money-printing programme aimed at keeping financial markets afloat. The ECB is committed to buying government debt and private securities with the new funds by the end of this year.

These vast sums are just a down payment, with government officials in treasuries in the main European counties stressing that there will be "unlimited" funds available. This was confirmed yesterday, as Johnson's government agreed to nationalise the losses of every private rail franchise in Britain for the next six months initially. This transfers all revenue and cost risk to the government, but leaves private firms able to still reap profits and be paid a management fee under an "emergency measures agreement."

Workers throughout Europe must demand a programme directly opposed to that of the corporations and the governments that act on their behalf. They must reject this unprecedented bleeding dry of the public purse for the purpose of funding big business and the bankers. These entities must be taken under public control and run by the working class in the interests of society.

In a statement Monday, "The spread of the pandemic and the lessons of the past week," the WSWS proposed the measures necessary for workers to take forward the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic: "The working class must demand universal testing and free and equal access to health care; the closure of all nonessential production, with full income to those affected; safe working conditions in industries essential to the functioning of society; and an emergency program to build health care infrastructure and ensure that all medical workers have access to the necessary equipment."

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