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Over 300,000 coronavirus deaths in Europe: Capitalism's crime against humanity

This week, as the coronavirus continued to surge out of control, Europe marked the grim milestone of more than 300,000 COVID-19 deaths.

Virtually every European country now faces a resurgence of the virus that threatens once again to overwhelm health care systems and kill hundreds of thousands. In Italy, the country hardest hit when the virus reached the continent, identical scenes to those that occurred just eight months ago are playing out. Yesterday, another 636 people died, up from 623 the day before and the highest number since April. The total number of infections in the country surpassed one million on Tuesday, and the total number of dead is now 43,589.

The country's hospital system is on the verge of collapse. By Wednesday, coronavirus patients made up more than 50 percent of patients in nine out of 21 provinces. The share of COVID-19 patients had reached 75 percent in Lombardy, 92 percent in Piedmont and 99 percent in South Tyrol. Ambulances are queuing up outside hospitals across the country due to a lack of available beds.

Unlike the first wave, when the pandemic was largely confined to the north, the virus has already overwhelmed a number of regions in the poorer south. In Naples, a 78-year-old woman waited for 26 hours in an ambulance before being admitted to a hospital this week. A video was widely shared online reportedly showing a patient lying dead in a bathroom of a hospital ward. Over the weekend, nurses at Naples' Catugno hospital provided oxygen treatment to patients sitting in their cars.

"We are very close to not keeping up. I cannot say when we will reach the limit, but that day is not far off," Dr. Luca Cabrini, who runs the intensive care ward at Varese's Circolo Hospital, told the Associated Press. Leoluca Orlando, the mayor of Palermo, warned that his city and the rest of Sicily were at risk of an "announced massacre."

In France, 425 people have died in the last 24 hours. More than 10,000 have died since the start of October, and 42,960 since the beginning of the pandemic. The 551 deaths on Monday were the most in a single day since the peak of 613 on April 6. In the Île-de-France region around Paris, more than 90 percent of urgent care beds are occupied. In Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes, the number of occupied emergency beds has reached 146 percent of official capacity, with patients now being transferred to other hospitals.

The UK saw another 525 deaths on Wednesday. The official death toll maintained by the government is now over 50,000. The true figure is tens of thousands higher. The British Office of National Statistics had estimated at least 61,000 deaths as of the end of October.

In Spain, there have been more than 1.4 million confirmed cases of the virus, and over 40,000 officially recorded deaths, with 356 reported in the past 24 hours. A study published this week in the open-access journal PLOS ONE reported that the average life expectancy at birth dropped by 0.9 years in Spain from 2019 to 2020 due to the pandemic. In three regions—Asturias, Murcia and Andalusia—the daily death toll has surpassed the peak in April.

In Germany, which has long been praised by the bourgeois media as a role model in handling the crisis, the situation is increasingly getting out of control. As a result of the opening policy, schools have become breeding grounds for the virus. Currently, more than 300,000 students and around 30,000 teachers are in quarantine and the numbers of daily infections (21,866 on Thursday) and intensive care cases (3,186) is higher than ever. Over 1,800 patients are on ventilators struggling for their lives. In some cities and regions no free intensive care beds are left and the death toll is rising.

In many smaller countries, the death toll as a portion of the total population is among the highest internationally. In Switzerland, one of the wealthiest countries in Europe, with a population of around 8.6 million people, 94 people died in the past 24 hours. In a country the size of the United States, this would equate to more than 3,000 deaths in a day.

How has this situation been allowed to occur, just eight months after the first peak of the virus on the continent? The first lockdowns took place in March, after wildcat strikes that erupted in Italy and Spain forced governments to take action to stem the spread of the virus, for fear of a popular revolt over their indifference to the death of thousands.

The European ruling class then deliberately adopted a policy, knowing it would lead to hundreds of thousands of deaths. These deaths are not inevitable. They amount to a crime against humanity perpetrated by the capitalist class and its political representatives.

The European Union used the opportunity provided by the lockdowns to push through two trillion euros in corporate bailouts. While lockdown measures massively cut the spread of the virus, the ruling elite concluded that a confinement stopping production and cutting corporate profits was unacceptable, no matter the number of deaths that would result from lifting the restrictions. Across Europe and in the US, governments prematurely reopened nonessential workplaces, herding tens of millions back to work to produce a continued flow of profits. This ensured the continued spread of the virus.

Already in July, the World Health Organization warned that the resurgence of the virus could be seen across Europe. However, nothing was done.

French Prime Minister Jean Castex expressed most clearly the standpoint of the ruling elite, declaring that same month that a lockdown “stops the spread of the pandemic, of course, but from an economic and social standpoint, it’s a disaster.”

At the beginning of October, as medical authorities warned publicly of an approaching collapse of the health care system, governments enacted partial lockdowns, but kept nonessential businesses open. Schools are also open. The public education system is being used as a child-minding service, with up to 35 students crammed into classrooms, so parents can be forced to remain at work.

This week, the Italian doctors association publicly demanded a full lockdown across Italy. However, Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte replied to *La Stampa* on Wednesday that “a generalised lockdown shouldn’t be the first choice—the costs would be too high.”

In other words, while a lockdown could save an untold number of lives, the “costs”—i.e., the impact on the profits of the corporate elite—are unacceptable. As far as the ruling elite is concerned, if the old and infirm die and allow for further cuts to pensions and health care, that is to be regarded as a positive good.

The response to the pandemic cannot be left in the hands of the capitalist class. Against its policy of profits and death, the working class must intervene to fight for a scientific response to the crisis.

The Socialist Equality Parties call for the formation of rank-and-file safety committees in every school and workplace across Europe, independent of the trade unions, which have helped implement government reopening policies in every country. These committees would provide the means to organize a Europe-wide general strike to compel the closure of schools and nonessential production and allow workers to shelter at home.

Massive resources must be invested to provide a high standard of living to everyone throughout the pandemic, including the resources required to maintain online learning for students. The claim that there is “no money” for such measures is a patent lie. Trillions of euros have been handed to the banks and corporations in bailouts since the beginning of the pandemic. The resources exist, but they are monopolized by a corporate and financial oligarchy.

The fortunes of the rich must be expropriated and the major corporations transformed into public utilities, democratically controlled by the working class as part of the socialist reorganization of economic life on the basis of social need, not private profit. This means the struggle of the working class across Europe to take political power and build the United Socialist States of Europe.

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