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Europe's COVID-19 deaths approach half a million

Two weeks before Christmas, the COVID-19 pandemic is raging out of control in Europe. Yesterday, the number of COVID-19 deaths again exceeded 5,000, bringing the European death toll to at least 444,135 people.

On Thursday, 887 people died of COVID-19 in Italy, 529 in Germany, 516 in the UK, 562 in Russia, 292 in France and 470 in Poland.



A paramedic walks out of a tent that was set up in front of the emergency ward of the Cremona hospital, northern Italy [Credit: Claudio Furlan/Lapresse via AP, file]

If the death toll remains at this level, December will be the deadliest month since the pandemic began, with over 150,000 deaths. Already in November, there were over 123,000 COVID-19 deaths, making it the deadliest month to date. Now, in the first 10 days of December, more than 50,000 people have already died of COVID-19, an average of 5,000 a day.

The situation is particularly dramatic in Sweden, where the “herd immunity” strategy that is effectively pursued by all European governments was first devised. By Thursday evening, it had recorded 7,354 deaths and over 312,000 infections. With a population of only 10.6 million, this means that almost three percent of all inhabitants have been infected. The infection rate doubled to over 500 cases per 100,000 inhabitants in the first two weeks of

November. On Thursday, the Swedish government reported a new record of 7,935 new infections.

Germany has long been praised in the bourgeois media as a model for how to handle the virus. Now, the country is at the centre of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe. After reporting a record death toll of 622 on Wednesday, Germany also reported a record in new infections on Thursday, with 28,179 cases. This figure was far higher than in France (13,750), the UK (20,964) and Italy (16,999)—the countries with the highest overall infection and death rates in the European Union.

Despite the deepening catastrophe, European governments of all stripes refuse to take necessary emergency measures and close schools and non-essential businesses to prevent hundreds of thousands of deaths. On the contrary, they are already preparing a further relaxation of their ineffective “lockdown light” measures. These have always been aimed at concealing the responsibility of the ruling class for the catastrophe as it sends youth to school and workers to work in order to secure the profits of the financial aristocracy.

Most European countries have kept schools and universities open without providing even the most limited safety measures or switching to online learning. There is no regulation of public transport used by tens of millions of workers every day, and even the limited lockdown measures on retail were scrapped to not impinge on Christmas shopping. This will inevitably massively spread the virus. Nevertheless, the agenda for the December 10-11 EU summit states that European governments will discuss “the overall coordination effort in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including... the gradual lifting of restrictions.”

On the evening of the first day of the summit, French Prime Minister Jean Castex announced that the population would be able to travel freely throughout France from 15 December. There will also be a nationwide 8 p.m.-6 a.m. curfew throughout the holidays, with the exception of Christmas Eve. Castex said his government’s target to cut the number of daily new infections below 5,000 would not be achieved. Nevertheless, schools will continue to operate normally until Christmas holidays begin, on December 19, and then resume operations as planned on January 4.

Before the Brussels summit, German Chancellor Angela Merkel summed up the position of the European bourgeoisie. In a statement to the German Bundestag on Wednesday, she said: “The lesson we learned from the spring was that we will do everything in our power to keep day care centres and schools open.” Merkel proposed that students open school windows in the winter cold, since good “aeration is also part of the job in the winter months.” She added, “This is simply because we have special conditions.”

That is unmistakable. Although the so-called “second wave” of the pandemic has already claimed more lives than the first, and scientific studies have shown that the “hard lockdowns” in the spring saved millions of lives, European governments have agreed that this time there will be no comprehensive measures to contain the virus.

In her speech, Merkel spoke of the social and political interests behind this murderous policy. It is about imperialist economic and geostrategic interests in the struggle between the great powers. “This pandemic is something that will certainly reorganise the balance of power in the world, first of all economically, but perhaps also socio-politically,” she declared, “which means we must see how we are embedded in the global context.”

Merkel remarked that the German economy, like the US economy, will collapse by four to six percent this year. She said that Germany is far behind countries like China, “which will emerge from these years with growth of 1.9 percent.” Germany must “do everything possible to ensure that the path of recovery that we embarked on in the third quarter after a massive slump in the second quarter can be continued.” German companies must “keep up with international competition,” and “everything possible must be done to ensure that we maintain German strength not only in the economic sphere.”

European capitalist governments refuse to close schools and factories—the main drivers of the pandemic—because they intend to relentlessly squeeze surplus value and profits from the working class.

The workers are to be made to pay for the hundreds of billions of euros handed out as part of the so-called Corona bailouts, mainly to the financial oligarchy, large companies and banks. Merkel said, “We must also always remember what public debt means. It means, of course, the burden on future budgets, it means the need to pay it back, and it means restrictions on future spending and on future generations.”

The European governments’ propaganda claims that they reacted more responsibly to the pandemic than the Trump government have been exposed as a fraud. As in the US, the European population faces a ruthless ruling class that literally feeds on death and misery. As infection and death rates skyrocket and hospitals across Europe teeter on the brink of collapse, share prices are skyrocketing, vastly enriching a small layer at the top of society.

This winter of death in Europe shows the bankruptcy of capitalism. If hundreds of thousands of lives are to be saved, the working class must intervene independently into political life in opposition to the social system that has led to this horrific disaster by blocking a rational, scientific policy. Fighting the pandemic—and also social inequality, war and dictatorship—requires the expropriation of the financial oligarchy and the transformation of society on a socialist basis.

Across Europe, the working class and youth are being radicalised, organising strikes and protests against the spread of the pandemic and the attacks on jobs and wages. The question of strategy and perspective is crucial. The European sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International and its sympathising group in Turkey are fighting to build a network of independent action committees to prepare a Europe-wide general strike to enforce the closure of schools and non-essential industries. In the struggle for political power, the working class must expropriate the financial oligarchy and replace the reactionary EU with the United Socialist States of Europe.

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