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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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18.11.2021

Governments reject pandemic controls amid record COVID-19 surge in Europe

It is two years exactly since the earliest documented case of COVID-19, which scientists have traced to November 17, 2019. Two years later, while lockdowns, social distancing and contact tracing policies have blocked the circulation of COVID-19 in China after less than 5,000 deaths, Europe is deep in yet another wave. Yesterday, over 290,000 people were diagnosed with COVID-19, and 4,141 died in Europe.

Thus, even if the pandemic stabilized and somehow did not accelerate further, over 400,000 people would die this winter. In fact, the World Health Organization (WHO) has projected that with current policies, 500,000 more people will die of COVID-19 in Europe by February 1. Virologist Christian Drosten of Berlin's Charité hospital has warned of 100,000 more deaths in Germany alone.



A crowded COVID-19 isolation room at the University Emergency Hospital in Bucharest, Romania, October 22, 2021. (AP Photo/Vadim Ghirda)

Europe is currently reporting 2 million COVID-19 cases per week. Last week, daily infections set records in Germany (50,377), the Netherlands (20,168), Austria (13,152), and Greece (8,613) and continued at high levels in Britain (37,243), Russia (36,818) and the Czech Republic (11,514). France's daily new cases nearly doubled over the last week from 10,050 to 19,778 yesterday. Over 1,000 deaths were recorded last week in Russia (8,593), Ukraine (4,590), Germany (1,194), Bulgaria (1,147), Poland (1,119) and Britain (1,083).

Yet governments across Europe are rejecting social distancing and especially strict lockdowns that can halt circulation of the virus on the present, massive scale. Only the international mobilization of the working class, fighting for scientific policies of social distancing and contact tracing, can stop the transmission of the virus, end the pandemic and avert a massive loss of life.

The strategy of the European ruling class is expressed most bluntly by the British government. Prime Minister Boris Johnson infamously stated, "No more f...ing lockdowns, let the bodies pile high in their thousands." Now, London proposes to allow the virus to spread across the population and become endemic, as UK Secretary of State for Education Minister Nadhim Zahawi said earlier this month: "[w]e will, I hope, be the first major economy to transition from pandemic to endemic ..."

If London boasts of its strategy of "herd immunity" via mass infection, the "mitigation" strategy of other European governments is not substantially different. Berlin, amid its greatest ever surge of COVID-19, is moving to end its official declaration of an "epidemic situation of national scope," ending the legal basis for public health measures against the virus. In Paris, Health Minister Olivier Véran has boasted that vaccines are "100 percent effective against lockdowns."

This would mean that every year thousands would die in Europe and millions worldwide of COVID-19. Arguments for this politically criminal strategy are being advanced on French television by Martin Blachier, a physician who left medical practice to run a "public health expertise consultancy" and promote state policy on the news. A week ago,

he told CNews: “We are at the beginning of a phenomenon of pandemic resurgence, and there is no reason for it to stop.”

Blachier called for governments to avoid any change in policy. “The hysteria over this resurgence that is seizing Western Europe, which has high vaccination rates, is a bit exaggerated. I think we must calm down! We are not in the same situation as last year. ... We must above all not get in the same frame of mind as we were in last year!”

If Blachier is worried, it was because in the spring of 2020, strikes erupted in Italy, Spain, France, Britain and beyond, as workers in nonessential industries demanded the right to shelter at home until the virus was contained. This terrified the ruling class, which was forced to allow public health personnel to implement lockdowns that massively reduced infections. This also cut across plans to use the pandemic to massively enrich the financial aristocracy, whatever the cost in lives.

Ultimately, it was not until workers could be forced back into workplaces to make profits for the banks that massive bank and corporate bailouts could be poured into the pockets of the super-rich. After the announcement of €2 trillion in European Central Bank and European Union bailouts last summer, the net worth of Europe’s billionaires rose by \$1 trillion, while 1 million people died in Europe, in what the *BMJ* (former *British Medical Journal*) correctly called a policy of “social murder.”

Now as the latest winter surge erupts, the Dutch and Austrian governments have announced partial lockdowns. These inadequate measures keep workers on the job and youth in school to keep making profits for the banks but limit the ability of the population (or the non-vaccinated population, in Austria) to meet others outside work. Most contagion occurs in workplaces, schools and medical facilities, however, and such measures—imposed during last year’s deadly winter surge—do not stop mass contagion and death from COVID-19.

This break with official opposition to lockdowns is manifestly a pre-emptive response to growing criticisms of state policy by medical professionals and social anger among workers.

Yesterday, hospitals in the southern Dutch province of Limburg warned that they could not cope with the onrush of COVID-19 patients and are again approaching collapse. “We are heading straight for a health care blockage, and the entire system is grinding to a standstill,” they declared in a public statement. “We are convinced that other parts of the Netherlands will soon follow.”

On Monday night, however, Blachier went on LCI to defend the policy of mass infection and denounce any move to re-establish social distancing policies. He admitted, “the infection levels we should reach by December 15 will be the highest we have ever seen. In terms of infections, we’ll probably get pretty high.” Nonetheless, he demanded that nothing be changed. “We must go towards vaccination and not go back to social distancing like the Netherlands. For me it’s crazy that they are doing that today.”

To be blunt, such declarations are politically criminal. As the *World Socialist Web Site* warned in August, “Vaccination is a powerful tool. However, disconnected from a broader strategy aimed at rapidly reducing new infections to zero and thus eradicating COVID-19, vaccination and other mitigations amount to nothing more than palliative care.”

Thus German health authorities reported that in the four weeks ending October 10, 55.4 percent of symptomatic cases were breakthrough infections of vaccinated patients. Vaccine effectiveness wanes over time, moreover, and in this time period, 28.8 percent of vaccinated COVID-19 patients over age 60 required intensive care unit treatment.

Last week, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus again warned, “COVID-19 is surging in countries with lower vaccination rates in Eastern Europe but also in countries with some of the world’s highest vaccination rates in Western Europe. It’s another reminder, as we have said again and again, that vaccines do not replace the need for other precautions. Vaccines reduce the risk of hospitalization, severe disease and death. But they do not fully prevent transmission.”

The working class must be mobilized again, this time to compel not only the adoption of lockdowns to initially slash contagion but a long-term policy of vaccination, contact tracing and other public health measures to eliminate the virus. It cannot be done in the grip of union bureaucracies that back state “mitigation” policies. It entails building the

International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) and arming workers across Europe and worldwide with a socialist perspective of fighting to expropriate the ill-gotten wealth of the super-rich and end the pandemic.

World Socialist 17.11.2021