

Health study: Austerity is costing lives in Europe

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Large sections of the European population are paying with their health, if not their lives, for the European Union (EU)-dictated austerity measures. This is the conclusion of a recent study published in the medical journal *The Lancet*. Worst off are the populations in Greece, Spain and Portugal, countries where the EU has imposed massive social cuts.

Numerous reports from Greece and Spain describe the despair and misery of the people as a result of the crisis: children who collapse in school from hunger; parents driven by poverty and desperation to send their children to care homes; pensioners who rummage through garbage for food; the seriously ill, who have lost their health insurance after a year of unemployment and are too late going to hospital—and are doomed to die.

A recent report in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* also describes the catastrophic situation in Greece. Since hospital casualty departments only open four days a week, patients face long journeys and waiting times. “Anyone who suddenly feels pain or even experiences a heart attack or stroke must make inquiries as to which casualty department is open.” Patients need to bring their own medicines, bandages, scissors and swabs as these are out of stock in hospitals.

Patients are usually cared for by family members. A nurse earns €1,000 for a 60-hour week. A senior physician was quoted as saying, “In Greece, unemployment today means death.” The unemployment rate in Greece is officially 26 percent, and 60 percent for those under 24.

In the study published in *The Lancet*, London medical professor Martin McKee, together with Marina Karanikolos from the European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies and Johan Mackenbach from the University of Rotterdam have systematically analysed

the effects of the crisis based on national studies and statistics.

They find that infectious diseases such as malaria, West Nile and Dengue Fever, HIV infections among drug addicts, depression and suicide have risen sharply.

While the number of suicides in people under 65 had declined in Europe steadily until 2007, before the financial crisis, it then increased sharply. This increase corresponds with the increase in unemployment and poverty. In England, the “significant” increase in the suicide rate between 2008 and 2010 is linked directly to rising unemployment, and resulted in 1,000 additional deaths, the study finds.

The Greek Ministry of Health reported a 40 percent rise in the suicide rate from January to May 2011 compared to the previous year.

Mental illness in Spain increased significantly from 2006 to 2010, including anxiety, psychosomatic complaints and depression. The latter had recorded the largest increase. At least half of mental illness is due to sudden unemployment, and the difficulty this causes in paying mortgages or rents.

In Portugal, the death toll in the winter of 2012 in people over 75 increased by 10 percent over the previous year. More than 40 percent of pensioners living alone cannot adequately heat their homes due to social cuts.

The *Lancet* study clearly places the blame on the austerity measures demanded by the “troika” comprising the European Union, European Central Bank (ECB) and International Monetary Fund in return “for financial rescue packages” for the southern European countries.

For example, the troika has demanded that Greece spend no more than 6 percent of gross domestic product on health care, “setting a precedent for the European

Union on acquisition of control over national health systems in individual countries.” Since the five austerity packages have driven the country deeper into recession, gross domestic product has fallen steadily, also reducing health expenditure. In 2009, health spending amounted to €14 billion; however, by last year, it was only an estimated €9.5 billion.

The troika is demanding cuts in Portugal of €670 million in health care alone.

In Spain, Portugal and Greece, many health facilities have been closed, hospital beds reduced and patient contributions for drugs increased in recent years. In Portugal, for example, patient contributions for drugs have more than doubled.

In Spain, in April 2012, a new law was introduced by Royal Decree—bypassing parliament—that makes the previous “universal” health care system now dependent on employment status. The result is that hundreds of thousands of illegal immigrants now hardly have access to health care.

Because funds for health prevention have been slashed heavily, there has been a significant increase in HIV infections among drug addicts in Greece since 2011. Between 2007 and 2010, there were 10 to 15 people infected with HIV; however, in 2011, this had risen to 256, and in the first eight months of 2012 to 314 newly infected. The reason is that, because of the cut backs, syringes are no longer being distributed to addicts. For those affected by these cuts, it means a death sentence.

McKee, one of the authors of the study, stressed that Europe’s political leaders have stubbornly denied these effects so far. He compares the behaviour of the European Commission and individual EU governments to the concealment tactics of the tobacco industry. “Finally, public health voices have been largely absent from the debate about how to respond. Many health ministries have been silent. The Directorate-General for Health and Consumer Protection of the European Commission, despite its legal obligation to assess the health effects of EU policies, has not assessed the effects of the troika’s drive for austerity, and has instead limited EU commentary to advice about how health ministries can cut their budgets.”

The researchers led by McKee rightly make the troika responsible for European austerity. They do not name any names. However, within the troika—and particularly

in the EU and the ECB—it is the German government under Chancellor Angela Merkel and Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble (both members of the Christian Democratic Union) that is the driving force.

Today, seven decades after German tanks wreaked destruction throughout Europe, a German government is bringing suffering and misery to the continent on a scale unknown outside times of war, and all in the name of “stability” and “saving the Union”. The austerity measures being imposed by Merkel and Schäuble, and which they even celebrate as a success, mean poverty, misery, despair and death for thousands. In particular, it is children who are the main victims, according to the study.

But the Merkel government can only impose its reactionary policies so ruthlessly because all the establishment parties openly or tacitly support them. Whether conservative or social democratic, all European governments agree that the European population has to pay for the billions of euros that are being made available to the banks. The pseudo-left opposition parties, such as the Left Party in Germany, the New Anti-Capitalist Party in France and SYRIZA in Greece, defend the EU and provide side cover for this social counterrevolution.



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