

Italy quarantines multiple provinces as coronavirus death toll rises to 366

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As the coronavirus epidemic spirals out of control in Italy and across Europe, the Italian government announced plans to place the economic centers in northern Italy on lockdown.

On Sunday, Italy announced 1,492 new cases and 133 new deaths—more deaths than in the rest of the world combined—bringing the total to 7,375 cases and 366 deaths in Italy. Several European countries also saw large increases, including France (177 new cases for 1,126 total), Germany (240 new cases for 1,040 total), Spain (148 new cases for 673 total) and Switzerland (69 new cases for 337 total). While Iran also announced a staggering 743 new cases and 49 deaths, Europe now has the world's fastest-rising numbers of documented coronavirus cases.

By contrast China, the disease's original epicenter, has been able to limit its spread by imposing large and drastic quarantines, isolating areas where the disease was widespread to prevent the sick from spreading the disease further. It also has devoted large financial resources to building hospitals and paying for treatment and unemployment compensation for workers trapped in the quarantine. As a result, it saw only 52 new cases yesterday—a number that has continued to fall, relieving pressure on hospitals and medical staff.

Late Saturday night, media reported that the government planned to put the region of Lombardy and other areas in Italy's industrial north on lockdown to quarantine these areas. This caused a panic, sending thousands rushing to the central train station in Milan, the capital of Lombardy, to try to leave before being trapped in the quarantine.

To quell rising public fear, Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte made a televised statement at 2 a.m. on Sunday morning. Conte tried to downplay the significance of the measures he was proposing. He said the

government decree does not establish a new quarantine area nor an absolute ban on activity, as it will be possible for people to travel for work, medical care or other reasons, but that the “security forces” would ensure people have valid reasons for their movements.

Nonetheless, Conte's quarantine order suspends all public and private gatherings including weddings, funerals and religious events. It forces the closure of all cinemas, theatres, night clubs, bingo halls, gyms, swimming pools, museums and ski resorts in the whole of the region of Lombardy and in 14 provinces: Modena, Parma, Piacenza, Regio Emilia, Rimini, Pesaro & Urbino, Alessandria, Asti, Novara, Verbano-Cusio-Ossola, Vercelli, Padova, Treviso and Venice. This area has more than 16 million inhabitants.

Restaurants and cafés in the affected areas can stay open, but only from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., and customers must stay at least 1m (3ft) from each other. Incredibly, travel will continue unabated, however—with airports and train stations remaining open, albeit with fewer passengers.

Asked what resources will be spent to fight the epidemic, Conte offered that he will ask Parliament and the European Union (EU) to divert just €7.5 billion of the current budget to the coronavirus.

This is hardly enough to fight the virus, and many wondered what Rome plans to cut in order to divert funds, as social and infrastructure programs have already been cut to the bone in recent years. Conte said specific measures would be elaborated by Tuesday. Conte also claimed his government could boost domestic production of critical medical equipment, such as masks, and order whatever remaining equipment was needed abroad.

At the same time, the Democratic Party (PD)-Five Star Movement (M5S) coalition government was

shaken by the news that PD leader Nicola Zingaretti is infected with the virus. This raises the risk that many top figures in the Italian state and ruling establishment, who have recently met Zingaretti, may also be infected.

The Italian government is leaving the population largely in the dark about the illness and about the massive investment of resources that will be required to halt its spread. Objections came both from workers and from Conte's rivals in the ruling class. Many asked why train services and flights weren't halted before the quarantine's implementation, to prevent people from infected regions spreading the disease more widely.

"In China, they are more rigid," waitress Miriam Ben Cheikh Amor told the *New York Times*. "Maybe we need some of that, too."

Local politicians in the affected regions criticized the central government for leaving them in the dark about the preparation and implementation of the quarantine decree, which they cannot explain to their constituents. "It's incredible. No one told me," said Rasero Maurizio, the mayor of Asti, a city affected by the decree in northern Italy's Piedmont region.

Since the crisis began, the Italian government's response has been haphazard at best. On February 28, Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio and Health Minister Roberto Speranza downplayed the outbreak's seriousness, saying it only concerned a tiny fraction of the country and that Italy is safe for tourists to visit—despite repeated warnings from the World Health Organisation that more had to be done.

Di Maio also criticized reporting on the disease for causing a panic on stock markets and thus hurting the government's main priority: the stock portfolios of the rich. He said, "The epidemic of misleading information is doing more damage to Italy than the risk of the virus epidemic itself."

On March 4, as it became clear that Italy faces a catastrophic emergency, the government issued a decree closing all schools and universities and banning fans from all sporting events until March 15.

Lombardy governor Attilio Fontana, a member of the far-right Lega party, assured Sky TG24 that the quarantine would not disrupt work or cause famines. He told his constituents not to stock up on food: "The supermarkets will always be full and stocked. We're not going to war but fighting the contagion of a disease. It's useless, a waste of time to buy food that goes bad.

That is a fear of those who have lived through the anguish of war."

Lega Party leader Matteo Salvini, who was reportedly unaware of the plan's details until they were released earlier today, issued a xenophobic rant blaming the disease on economic globalization: "From an evil we must draw good, rediscover the pride of being Italian, and then eat, dress, consume Italian, holiday in Italy. This serves as a lesson, because evidently the model of development based on globalization has failed."

In fact, it is only through intense international collaboration, both scientific and industrial, that the resources can be found to fight this highly contagious and potentially fatal disease, for which there is currently neither a vaccine nor a cure. The central force that can be politically mobilized is the working class. After a decade in which Italian workers have been looted by EU austerity imposed by Rome, the funds must be taken from the financial aristocracy to guarantee affordable treatment for all.



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