With 17 confirmed cases of coronavirus, Polish hospitals teeter on the brink of collapse

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One week after the first confirmed case of coronavirus and with 17 patients now having tested positive for the disease Covid-19, Polish hospitals are on the brink of collapse. More than 170 people are hospitalized and over 4,000 are in domestic quarantine.

At a press conference on Monday, Polish Minister of Health ?ukasz Szumowski said that new cases in Poland would emerge "very fast" in the coming days. Donald Tusk, the former prime minister of Poland of the opposition party Civic Platform (PO), described the situation on twitter as "very serious." The Polish government advises that all gatherings with more than 1,000 people be cancelled.

So far, the majority of cases were infected in Germany and one patient was reportedly infected in the Czech Republic. Patients are now being treated in at least half a dozen Polish cities, including Zielona Góra and Wroc?aw in Silesia, in Cracow and in the Warsaw region. In neighbouring Ukraine, public schools have been closed in the Chernivtsi region where the first confirmed case of coronavirus was recorded. In the Czech Republic, 31 cases were confirmed as of Monday afternoon.

The situation is rapidly spinning out of control, threatening to trigger a massive social and political crisis in the region.

After two months of falsely claiming that Poland would not be dramatically affected by what is now the most far-reaching pandemic since the Spanish flu in 1918/1919, the far-right government of the Law and Justice Party (PiS) announced on Monday that it will introduce medical tests on the Czech and German border. Passengers on trains and buses, as well as car drivers, will have their temperature taken.

The number of cases has skyrocketed in Germany over the weekend. It reached 1,151 by Monday afternoon, with two people reported dying from Covid-19. After Italy and France, Germany is the country with the highest recorded number of corona patients in Europe.

Germany has a Polish-born population of about 2 million, the vast majority of which still have close connections to their family and friends in Poland. In addition, thousands of Polish workers also work in Germany on a seasonal and short-term basis. There are direct train connections between several major Polish cities and Berlin. Many Poles also live in or commute to North Rhine-Westphalia, the main centre of the outbreak in Germany. The Czech government too has introduced temperature measurement of car and train passengers at 10 border crossings.

Reports make clear that even the so far limited number of patients is bringing the Polish health care system to the brink of a total break-down.

The university hospital in Zielona Góra, where the first confirmed case has been treated for a week, already reported shortages of critical medical supplies by Wednesday. On Friday, hospital workers told the *Gazeta Wyborcza* that they had only 400 masks and 40 suits for the protection of doctors and nurses, sufficient "for a few hours of work." The hospital requested 2 million zloty (about US$530,000) of emergency help to acquire basic medical equipment such as cardiac monitors, respirators, inhalators, bronchofiberscopes and equipment for external disinfections. As in the US and many other countries, Polish hospitals are reporting that they are only receiving a portion of the masks and other medical equipment that they had ordered to confront the coronavirus outbreak.

Basic medical supplies, including disinfectants, sanitizers and masks, have surged in price internationally in recent weeks. China, which accounts

for about 80 percent of the global production of masks, reportedly all but stopped exports in January to confront the massive outbreak of Covid-19 within its borders.

Many Polish hospitals are systematically delaying planned operations that are not immediately necessary to help protect patients and staff from infections. However, much of the funding for hospitals from the National Health Fund (NSZ) is based on the number of operations they perform. Thus, the measures they take to protect patients and medical staff from infections are set to further worsen the financial position of the hospitals, making it even more difficult to acquire necessary medical equipment.

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki announced that the government would spend 100 million zloty ($26.5 million) on the fight against the coronavirus. But this will be only a drop in the ocean.

Even before this crisis, Polish hospitals were facing shortages of medical equipment across the board. While cuts have been implemented by all Polish governments since the dissolution of the Polish People's Republic by the Stalinist bureaucracy in 1989 and the restoration of capitalism, the situation has become nothing less than catastrophic under the PiS government.

In a poll conducted last year, 92 percent of Polish hospitals indicated that they were running on a deficit, up from 51.21 percent in 2015. The median deficit of Polish hospitals rose from 1 million zloty (about $265,000) to 5 million zloty ($1,326,000) in the same time period. This means that for years most hospitals have been unable to purchase new and necessary medical equipment.

According to an article by the *Rzeczpospolita* published last autumn, every day of 2019 a medical department was closed in a Polish hospital due to lack of funding and personnel. In some months, up to three departments were closed per day. The number of medical departments at hospitals specializing in infectious diseases was cut from 119 to 79 in the past few years. Thirty percent of virologists in Poland are old enough to retire, the very demographic most vulnerable to the coronavirus. In February 2020, the German *Deutschlandfunk* reported that a third of Polish hospitals were set to be closed in the near future even though the number of patients was rising.

In light of this staggering crisis, *Rzeczpospolita* warned last week that "Chaos in the health care system [because of the coronavirus] could upend Polish politics and impact the outcome of the presidential elections in May."

The complete breakdown of the Polish health care system is a direct result of the restoration of capitalism and decades of social cuts in which all bourgeois parties have been complicit. Poland is now one of the most unequal countries in Europe, with income inequality on a level similar to that of Germany and Britain.

As everywhere else, the issue is not a lack of resources. While PiS has engaged in further cuts in health care and offered only a paltry 500 zloty child benefit per month to families with multiple children, the number of millionaires in the country has risen in the past five years.

The wealth research firm Wealth-X noted in a 2019 report that Poland was among the countries with the fastest growing layer of high net worth individuals in the world, along with countries such as Kenya and Ukraine. In the study, high net worth individuals were defined as those with between $1 million and $30 million. In 2017, an estimated 57,000 people in Poland had a net worth of over $1 million. Meanwhile, the median income in Poland is just about a third of the European Union average. Millions of workers, including teachers, doctors as well as most pensioners, have to get by on just a few hundred dollars a month.