

Spain puts Madrid, Basque country on lockdown as coronavirus cases multiply

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Yesterday, the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government passed a decree temporarily suspending all closed-door events of more than 1,000 people in coronavirus-hit areas of Spain: Madrid, La Rioja and the Basque towns of Vitoria and Labastida. The national and regional governments agreed to close all educational facilities, from kindergartens to universities. They also recommended avoidance of travelling in high-transmission areas and called for people to work from home.

The government also decided that all sports events involving “a great number of people” will be played behind closed doors for two weeks. The popular semi-publicly funded tourism trips organised by the Institute for the Elderly and Social Services for pensioners have also been suspended until next month. Flights between Italy and Spain are banned until the end of the month.

The decision came after Spain’s Ministry of Health said there were 1,622 registered cases, compared to 1,200 the day before. The repeated 30 percent day-to-day increases shows that the contagion is out of control. The virus has so far killed 35 people and 135 have been discharged from hospital, while a total of 17,500 tests have been performed.

Coronavirus cases have been detected in up to 10 universities so far, in Madrid, Valladolid, Valencia, Málaga and Seville. On Monday, the Madrid regional government closed its six public and eight private universities, affecting more than 300,000 students and 45,000 teachers and nonteaching staff. The closure also extends to primary and secondary schools. In Madrid alone, this affects 1.5 million students.

Madrid has also closed senior centres, affecting 213 different sites across the region, in a bid to stop the contagion. The measure was taken after the deaths of two elderly people.

Spain’s parliament has also decided to suspend all its parliamentary activity for a week after Javier Ortega Smith, a leading deputy of the fascistic Vox party, tested positive for coronavirus.

The spread of the virus takes places after a decade of austerity by Madrid and the European Union has devastated Spain’s health system. According to a 2018 study published by Social Summit, an association of unions, NGOs and researchers, under the title “A lost decade: an analysis of 10 years of cuts”, Spanish public health lost between 15 and 21 billion euros in its budget since 2009.

These cuts were then continued by the Podemos-backed PSOE government, which took power in 2018. In October last year, the PSOE government promised the European Union 5.9 percent of GDP in public healthcare expenditure, 1.2 billion euros less than the previous budget.

The case is even worse in Madrid, the epicentre of the coronavirus epidemic, with its 6.5 million inhabitants. The regional government has passed the lowest budget per capita in public health of all the regions in Spain, has closed nearly 2,000 hospital beds since the 2008 crisis and has slashed 5,000 jobs from its health workforce, going from 75,490 in 2009 to 70,171 employees in 2017.

As a result, calls to the coronavirus hotline go unanswered, Madrid’s Valdemoro hospital is “flooded”, and the intensive care unit in La Paz hospital is exclusively dedicated to coronavirus patients. Maria José Frontino, a delegate of the Stalinist Workers Commissions (CC.OO) union in the private health industry, told *El País* that “there are 2,000 health professionals missing, promised by the regional government for the flu campaign and which were never hired ... this can cause a massive collapse.”

After decades of austerity, militarism and attacks on democratic rights that have devastated society, capitalist governments are failing to halt the spread of the global pandemic. The epidemic is revealing the deep-going social rot produced by capitalism, and the necessity for workers to take power into their own hands to deal with the pandemic.

Journalist Cristina Fallarés wrote a piece titled “Social class and Coronavirus”, asking: “How should those thousands of families with small children who cannot afford to pay a caregiver or have someone take care of them organise themselves?” With one in three Spanish children at risk of poverty, Fallarés asked: “Have they thought about the shameful number of families whose children make their only meal thanks to schools?”

As schools shut down, *El País* quoted a school headmaster asking, “Why haven’t they taken this measure [school shutdowns] earlier?” It cited teachers complaining that the measure came too late to prevent possible infections, and that students could transmit the virus to older teachers, who are at greatest risk from the disease.

Anger among health workers is also increasing. In the Basque country, 100 health care professionals remain in quarantine for 14 days and another 100 are under observation. Health workers are complaining to unions of shortages in basic means of protection such as gloves and masks.

On the other side, the ruling class is seizing on the health crisis to call for an escalation of attacks on the working class. Catalonia’s main business federation, Foment del Treball, has called for slashing corporate tax and for mass sackings, supposedly to combat the virus. In its statement, it even called for the state to subsidise dismissals and allow companies to not abide by the legal 15-day notice for redundancies. It also called for the government to promote the purchasing of new cars through tax incentives and subsidies.

Meanwhile, shares of Spanish drug maker PharmaMar rose nearly 15 percent last week and another 15 percent on Friday after it stated it has a potential treatment for coronavirus and has the capacity to produce diagnostic kits which can “detect the virus even before patients show symptoms.”

Workers and youth in Spain and internationally must demand emergency action to stop the spread of the

virus and provide the necessary care for all those who are infected. As the WSWS stated in “What must be done to fight the coronavirus pandemic”, the principle that must guide the response is that the needs of society overrule the interests of profit. Capitalist calculations of share values and profits must not be allowed to limit, undermine, or prevent the combating of the disease.” This means, among other urgent measures:

- Paid sick leave for all workers: It is vital to ensure that workers do not feel pressured to work when they are sick. Corporations and governments must immediately begin providing paid sick leave for all employees.

- Immediate and full salary compensation to all workers, including part-time and self-employed workers, affected by the closure of public events, or who must stay home to take care of their children, the sick or the elderly and disabled.

- Support the ill and the quarantined: No one should fear that being designated and quarantined means neglect and ostracism. Workers should form neighbourhood committees to ensure that the sick and the quarantined have social support and the necessary food and supplies.

- Stop price gouging and profit-taking: drug makers should be nationalized to operate for social need, not profit. Medical supplies must be made available to households and medical workers. All those profiteering from the crisis should be held criminally liable.

- Protect refugees, prisoners and the homeless: prisoners, refugees and the homeless must be released from unsanitary facilities and given access to hygienic facilities and medical care. The infamous CIE (*Centro de Internamiento de Extranjeros*) migrant detention centres must be immediately closed down.



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