

More than 250 deaths in Italy in one day as coronavirus continues to spread

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As most of Italy remains in lock-down, the coronavirus death rate is continuing to accelerate as medical professionals struggle to combat the disease.

Yesterday, another 250 deaths were reported across the country, bringing the total to 1,266, out of 17,660 total infections. The number of infections has increased by more than 2,500 since Thursday night.

Italy is the focal point of the coronavirus outbreak in Europe, after the World Health Organization reported on Friday that Europe had become the “epicentre” of the disease, with more cases reported than in China even at the height of its outbreak.

As the virus continued to spread, workers began to launch wildcat strikes across the country spanning multiple industries, to demand that factories be shut down throughout the pandemic, and to protest the absence of safe conditions created by the criminal indifference of the government and the corporate and financial elite. No restrictions have been placed on the operations of large industries, despite the most severe social controls being introduced since World War II.

Until March 25, all citizens remain confined to their homes and are not allowed out of the house for any reason other than a medical emergency or to buy food and medicine or to let out their dog, but only within their immediate neighbourhood and only for as long as strictly necessary.

Newsstands and tobacconists remain open with limited hours, and all bars, restaurants, pubs, ice-cream parlours, and pastry shops are closed entirely. Travel by bicycle, motor vehicle, train, and plane is allowed only for approved activities, and citizens are being stopped by the army and police for proof of the need to travel. Residents must carry a written self-declaration that can be verified.

All public gatherings and museum visits are

prohibited, and schools remain closed until at least April 3.

Professional soccer’s Serie A season is postponed because a Juventus centre-back Daniel Rugani tested positive for the virus. The entire team is in isolation, and the Italian football federation said that the Serie A season may not finish because of the coronavirus outbreak. The league is considering alternative options including staged play-offs, not having a champion for 2019-20, or declaring the current standings final.

The expanded quarantine measures, combined with the US government’s ban on all flights from Europe, led to another huge drop in the Italian stock market, with the Italian FTSE MIB exchange down another six per cent.

Faced with the breakdown in health services produced by the slashing of social expenditure by successive governments over decades, social media campaigns sprang up by the population to organise fundraisers for hospitals and form groups of neighbourhood volunteers to help the elderly and infirm with food and medical supplies. There was also a nationwide, impromptu singalong organised on social media on Friday night that brought millions of Italians out to their balconies and terraces to sing songs of solidarity to each other.

The contrast could not be more stark, however, between the resources the European ruling class is placing at the disposal of the major banks, and those it is using to treat the disease and help workers and small businesses devastated by the disease. Faced with an ongoing market crash, the European Central Bank immediately pumped 120 billion euros into the financial markets.

For the population, however, the Conte government proposed nothing beyond vague and completely

insufficient fiscal relief measures. Nothing has been defined, other than a 25-billion-euro rescue fund that may include babysitting vouchers, mortgage and utility hiatuses for those who can obtain a medical certificate proving they were incapacitated by the virus. The banks will be bailed out via a loan guarantee scheme to ensure that nothing can affect the fortunes of the financial aristocracy.

The health system has collapsed under the immense pressure on intensive care units, especially in the north of the country where the epidemic first took hold. This week, the Italian Society of Anaesthesiology and Intensive Care published 15 ethical recommendations for doctors to consider when deciding whom to admit to intensive care during the epidemic. Criteria include the age of the patient and the probability of survival, not just “first come first served.” Doctors are being forced to make an impossible decision of who lives and who dies.

Hospitals across Italy have been scrambling to increase their intensive care capacity, converting operating and recovery rooms into isolation wards to treat critical virus patients currently in need. The Lombardy region managed to cobble together 150 more beds in the last two weeks and expects to bring another 150 online next week.

All routine and non-urgent medical procedures, except for oncological and paediatric visits, are cancelled indefinitely.

Dr. Massimo Galli, the head of infectious disease at Milan’s Sacco hospital, told SkyTg24, “Unfortunately we’re only at the beginning [of the crisis],” noting that the numbers of infections registered in Lombardy last week were similar to those in Wuhan, China in late January.

On Thursday, the Italian government appealed to the European Union countries to send lifesaving medical supplies, but the appeal was promptly refused by both France and Germany. Shortly afterwards, reports emerged that the German government was preventing shipments of medical supplies from leaving the country. Chancellor Angela Merkel denied that there was an “export ban,” before declaring that “We just want to make sure the medical materials are in the right hands.”

China has dispatched a team of nine medical staff to Italy, who arrived late on Thursday, along with 30

tonnes of equipment. China has reportedly sent 1.8 million face masks and 100,000 reagents for testing for the disease to Italy and Spain.

On social media, workers and young people are denouncing the European Union and the European Commission for years of draconian austerity policies and false promises that have prepared the conditions for the coronavirus to have such a catastrophic impact.



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