

Italian army drafted to transport corpses as coronavirus deaths surge in Europe

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As schools, universities and workplaces closed across Europe, and Italy, France, and Spain imposed confinement on their populations, Europe's coronavirus death toll surged yesterday. With 244,799 coronavirus cases worldwide now, Europe is declaring 107,397 cases and 4,964 deaths and 800 of the 1,010 people who died yesterday—including 16 in Germany, 44 in Britain, 108 in France, 165 in Spain and 427 in Italy.

In the pandemic's first epicenter, China, there have been 3,245 deaths and 80,928 cases, of which 70,420 have recovered, and the number of active cases continues to fall after drastic confinement measures and aggressive treatment largely halted the spread of the disease. But in Europe, the new epicenter, the disease is still spreading out of control, swamping growing numbers of hospital systems with patients suffocating from pneumonia due to the virus.

Italy has seen 41,035 cases and 3,405 coronavirus deaths—more deaths than in China, which has 23 times Italy's population. Health systems in northern Italy, the European epicenter of the disease, are so overwhelmed that they cannot process the corpses of the dead, let alone tend to all the sick. The 427 deaths yesterday came after 475 people died Wednesday in Italy, the single highest daily death toll in any country throughout the pandemic.

A human tragedy of enormous dimensions is unfolding in Italy. In Bergamo, where the number of dead is rising faster than authorities and churches can bury or cremate them, the Italian government sent a convoy of fifteen army trucks to transport the corpses to other cities for disposal. Loaded with coffins, the trucks drove at night through the city's deserted streets, filmed only by Bergamo residents confined in apartments overlooking their route.

Abandoned by the Italian government, doctors are taking to social media to issue desperate appeals for help. Dr Stefano Fagioli of Bergamo's Papa Giovanni hospital

posted a brief video in English, in which he said: "I have two messages. The first one is for the general population: please stay at home. The second message is for whoever wants to help us. We are in desperate need of both nurses and physicians, together with ventilators and protective equipment."

In Cremona, Dr Romano Paolucci said, "we are at the end of our strength. This is a small hospital and we are taking in a lot of people." The number of critically pneumonic patients is far larger than the number of ventilators available to save them, forcing doctors to make the barbaric choice of whom they will try to save and whom they will condemn to death by denying them access to a ventilator. Staff are shattered, Paolucci added, watching patients "die alone, without a loved one at their side, often having to say their final farewell over a scratchy cell phone line."

As the numbers of cases and deaths surge in Europe, moreover, such conditions are gradually emerging across the continent. Spain saw 2,626 new cases and 165 deaths yesterday, and staff are reporting that hospitals in Madrid, one of the worst hit areas, are on the verge of collapse. Multiple patients are crammed into single rooms, intensive care beds are installed in hallways, every available machine is used, and yet, as one doctor told *El Diario*, "We are in a terrible situation. In intensive care Wednesday we had 200 people we could not treat, people were crying."

Similar conditions are expected in Paris. On Tuesday, as shelter-in-place confinement took effect across France, epidemiologists told the Paris Public Hospitals (AP-HP) management they would need not hundreds, but 4,000 intensive care beds to deal with a surge in cases expected to continue for weeks after confinement begins. After the "shock" this announcement produced, staff moved to convert all available space at Paris hospitals to coronavirus care. However, doctors still report critical

shortages including of ventilator equipment and medical masks.

“We are all afraid of what is coming,” Dr Nicolas Van Grunderbeeck told *Le Monde* in Arras, while a Paris doctor denounced authorities’ failure to act more quickly: “The material is finally being provided, but it will probably not be enough. It is three weeks ago we should have started the quarantines, emptying the hospitals, training everyone to treat COVID-19. I am terrified that if there is not a real quarantine, strict shelter-at-home orders, then there will be even more deaths.”

These events underscore the criminal character of the policies pursued by European capitalism. European Union (EU) austerity pursued over decades, particularly since the 2008 Wall Street crash, looted critical health and social infrastructure and drastically increased social inequality. And as the number of cases began to explode in late February, EU governments opposed shelter-at-home confinement orders and tried to force workers to stay on the job—hoping to avoid shutting down factories and keep providing massive bailouts to prop up inflated stock markets.

With stunning indifference to human life, top EU officials demanded workers keep working and accept that tens or hundreds of millions across Europe would fall ill. Chancellor Angela Merkel said 60 to 70 percent of the German population (49 to 57 million people) would become sick. Sir Patrick Vallance, the UK’s chief scientific adviser, argued against efforts to halt the spread of coronavirus: “It’s not possible to stop everyone getting it *and it’s also not desirable* because you want some immunity in the population to protect ourselves in the future” [emphasis added].

Though social distancing and confinement of large sections of the working population at home are necessary to halt the spread of such a contagious illness, many EU officials are maintaining this policy. On Wednesday evening, Merkel spoke again, ruling out a national confinement order and proposing no measures to train new personnel and build new medical equipment. On Monday, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte also dismissed shelter-in-place orders as impractical and insisted they would not be implemented, though 2,460 Dutch people now have the virus.

It is becoming increasingly clear that the losses in human life being prepared throughout the world may approach those of major armed conflicts.

At 107,397 cases in Europe, hospitals are already swamped, critical patients are being denied life-saving

care, and the pandemic is claiming many thousands of lives. Were 60 to 70 percent of the EU population (305-356 million people) to fall ill with coronavirus, the horrific scenes taking place in Milan and Madrid would be replicated a thousand-fold across Europe. Hospitals would be completely overwhelmed, tens of millions would be denied care, and many millions would die.

The independent political intervention of the working class in Europe and internationally against the reactionary policies of the financial aristocracy is now a matter of life and death. It was only the eruption of wildcat strikes in factories across Italy last week that compelled the Italian government to abandon its opposition to confinement orders—a policy subsequently adopted in France, and in Madrid and the Basque Country in Spain.

To fight the illness, however, power cannot be left in the hands of the ruling class. EU governments still refuse to organize mass testing of the population to identify those spreading the illness, to organize emergency production of key medical equipment to treat the sick, and to support workers in a period of quarantine and confinement. This undermines the long-term value of whatever quarantine policies have been adopted.

After the European Central Bank (ECB) agreed this week to give a 750 billion-euro bailout to EU financial markets, claims that there are no resources for such policies are absurd. These resources exist, and no consideration of private wealth or profit can be allowed to interfere with the use of this wealth, produced by the working class, to save lives.

The upsurge of strikes across Italy and internationally points to the power of the working class, acting independently of state-controlled trade union bureaucracies, to take control of factories and impound the wealth of the financial aristocracy. Only such a struggle, based on a socialist perspective, can overcome toxic levels of social inequality and provide resources for a coordinated, international fight against the virus.



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