Coronavirus kills more than 2,600 across Europe in one weekend

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The coronavirus pandemic surged across Europe this weekend, with more than 2,600 deaths, the majority of them in Italy, followed by Spain, France, Britain, the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany. The weekend toll by itself nearly equaled the entire three-month death toll in China, where the epidemic began.

On Sunday alone there were 1,287 deaths and 17,303 new cases, with Italy, Spain and France all seeing record numbers of deaths from the epidemic. The total for the continent as a whole reached 168,803 cases and 8,785 deaths.

The toll from the pandemic in Europe has now reached more than double the impact in China, which saw 81,054 cases and 3,261 deaths. Worldwide, there have been 335,377 declared cases of coronavirus and 14,611 deaths.

A third major epicenter is Iran, where there have been at least 21,638 cases including 1,685 deaths, while the number of cases in the United States has skyrocketed to more than 32,000, with 400 deaths. There is also a rapid growth in the number of cases in Africa and Latin America.

Though Italy, Spain and France are under country-wide lockdown, as well as large parts of Germany, the contagion is spreading relentlessly across Europe, after governments refused for weeks to adopt shelter-in-place orders or make any serious effort to actually stop the contagion by combining lockdowns with testing, contact-tracing and quarantining all those either infected or in contact with the infected.

Italy, Europe's worst-hit country for now, saw 5,560 new cases and 651 deaths on Sunday after 6,557 new cases and a record 793 deaths on Saturday, for 59,138 cases overall and 5,476 deaths. On Saturday, Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte announced that all factories would close indefinitely except for those "strictly necessary ... to guarantee us essential goods and services." Officials in Lombardy, the hardest-hit region, warned that stricter measures, like a ban on anyone leaving their homes, might be taken as hospitals continue to be flooded with critically ill patients gasping for air.

While Russian military aid and a group of Cuban doctors arrived in Italy, the European Union (EU) still refuses to provide aid to the devastated country. A diplomatic incident ensued this weekend over the theft of a shipment of 680,000 Chinese face masks to Italy in the Czech Republic, whose government initially denied that anything had been stolen. The Czech government is now sending masks and respirators to Italy, however.

Italian health officials pointed to the slight fall in the number of infected and of deaths on Sunday, as well as the fact that only 30.4 percent of new cases were in Lombardy, as signs the contagion might be slowing. The incubation period of the virus typically ranges from three to seven days and can go up to 14. As confinement orders to prevent further spread of the disease took effect over a week ago, many of those already infected and incubating the virus at that time could be expected to have already started showing symptoms.

However, officials also warned not to take false hope. "I hope and we all hope that these figures can be borne out in the coming days. But do not let your guard down," commented Italian civil protection service chief Angelo Borrelli.

In Spain, there were 3,925 new cases and 288 deaths Saturday and 3,107 new cases and 375 deaths Sunday, bringing the total to 28,603 cases and 1,756 deaths. One of those who has fallen ill is the beloved opera singer, Placido Domingo, lately a target of the right-wing #MeToo movement. Moreover, 12 percent of the confirmed cases (3,475) are doctors, nurses or health staff, devastating the health system which is already flooded with patients in key areas such as Madrid.

On Saturday, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez warned that "the worst is to come." As confined Spanish people banged on pots and pans to protest his handling of the pandemic, Sanchez pledged to organize more mass testing for coronavirus. The Sanchez government has prolonged Spain's state of alarm and lockdown until at least April 11.

In France, where the first doctor died of coronavirus in Compiègne, the total number of cases rose to 16,018 with 674 deaths, including 112 on Sunday alone. Health Minister Olivier Véran also said he believed the true number of cases in France is 30,000 to 90,000. However, he brazenly ignored calls from health professionals to carry out mass testing to identify and isolate all the sick before they can spread the disease to others. Instead, Véran said France would increase testing "once confinement orders are lifted," that is, at some point in the indefinite future.

In Germany, officials are reportedly considering a nationwide

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lockdown as the number of sick rose 2,488 on Sunday to 24,852. Amid growing fears of coronavirus infections in rest homes, nine elderly residents of a home have died and thirty people have been infected, including some of the rest home's staff, in the town of Würzburg, where 166 people have already fallen ill. Among those now self-isolating, moreover, is German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who reportedly came into contact with a doctor who later tested positive for the virus.

In Britain, 48 people died and 665 fell ill on Sunday, bringing the total to 281 deaths and 5,683 cases—including the first teenager to die of coronavirus in Britain, aged 18.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson came under growing criticism for his refusal to act against the pandemic. After his scientific advisor Patrick Vallance said it was "not desirable" to prevent Britons from contracting the disease—claiming this would prevent them from becoming immune—Johnson was forced to deny a *Sunday Times* report that his far-right adviser Dominic Cummings had argued to "let old people die."

The pandemic is rapidly bringing to the fore deep class divisions internationally. The financial aristocracy is determined to let the disease run its course, so long as they are able to emerge richer than ever before. While the European Central Bank has printed €750 billion since the pandemic began to bail out stock markets and the super-rich, and national states are offering hundreds of billions of euros in financial guarantees for the corporations, businesses across Europe demand workers stay on the job to keep making profits for them.

Anger is mounting among health workers and industrial workers, however, at the ruling elite's irresponsible attitude to this deadly pandemic. Amazon has stopped shipping non-essential products in Italy, after strikes last week and threats of strike action by Amazon workers in France.

After a wave of wildcat strikes in Italy forced Conte to adopt the initial confinement order, health professionals are bitterly criticizing decades-long EU austerity policies that have slashed health budgets and devastated hospitals .

In Spain, a hospital supply purchaser spoke to *El Espanol* to criticize Sanchez's Spanish Socialist Party-Podemos government's failure to order face masks and emergency respirators. "He did not buy them on time, it is a scandal," he said. "In the meantime they were debating about local elections in the Basque Country and Galicia or asking whether the Montero law on sexual freedom was creating conflict in the ruling coalition. What stupidities, with coronavirus looming over it all! What a waste of time!"

In France, a group of 600 doctors has sued Prime Minister Edouard Philippe and former Health Minister Agnès Buzyn before the Republic's Court of Justice (CJR) over their handling of the pandemic. They are accusing Philippe and Buzyn of having "voluntarily abstained from taking or launching measures" against "a danger for the security of persons." After Buzyn admitted she had warned Philippe of the danger of a pandemic since January, the group is demanding a criminal investigation of Philippe and the seizure of his computers.

Amid growing class conflict, as workers clash with the state and the banks to try to secure social resources to fight the pandemic, the ruling elite—assisted by the union bureaucracy and its pseudo-left political allies—is moving to suppress opposition. Obsessed with giving handouts to the banks and the super-rich, it is preparing attacks on wages and basic social and democratic rights and accelerating moves towards authoritarian forms of rule.

As Portugal's social-democratic government voted a state of emergency on March 18, suspending the constitutional right to strike for the first time since the fall of the fascist Salazar dictatorship in 1974, Spain deployed the army at home to enforce the state of alarm. In France, the government adopted a bill for a new state of emergency during the coronavirus crisis that allows businesses to slash a week of vacation and eliminate restrictions on the length of the workweek—even after the coronavirus crisis is over. These measures emerged from talks between business and the unions.

In Germany on Friday, the IG Metall union used the coronavirus crisis as a pretext to abandon talks with employers and accept contracts with no wage increases—claiming this was necessary to protect business activity. Left Party official Dietmar Bartsch hailed Merkel's policies, tweeting, "The Left party fraction will support all measures that demand solidarity to avoid damage to the nation, people and the economy."

The defense of workers' health, livelihoods and democratic rights after years of EU austerity and police-state repression demands a social revolution and a break with this rotten establishment. The struggle to stem the pandemic, obtain decent wages during lock-downs, and obtain free and decent medical coverage for all is an international political struggle. This requires the organization of the working class across Europe and internationally in rank-and-file committees of action, independent of the unions, and a struggle to transfer political power to the working class.

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