Death toll over 12,000 in Europe as coronavirus infections escalate

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The European continent is the epicentre of a pandemic, which the World Health Organisation (WHO) warns is "accelerating" globally. It took 67 days from the first recorded case of COVID-19 to reach the milestone of 100,000 cases globally, 11 days to reach 200,000, four days to reach 300,000 and three days to reach 400,000.

By yesterday evening 12,077 people had died of COVID-19 across the continent; another 1,742 perished in the previous 24 hours. With a further 22,715 new cases, this brings total recorded cases in Europe to 218,015. Among the European Union's 27 countries, total deaths have reached 11,479.

In Italy, deaths in the last 24 hours jumped to 743, bringing the total to 6,820. The number of infected climbed by 5,249 to nearly 70,000.

Spain saw 514 fatalities, taking its death toll to 2,696. The country's infection rate has climbed above Italy's for the first time, with 6,584 more cases in the last day. The horrific events have forced the conversion of the ice rink in Madrid into a makeshift morgue and the Ifema conference centre into a field hospital with 5,500 beds.

Another 87 people died in the UK, a rise of 26 percent and the highest daily increase, bringing the total to 422. Of those who died in the last day, 21 perished in a single hospital trust in northwest London. The capital's ExCeL Centre, normally used for exhibitions and large events, is being turned into a field hospital with a planned 4,000 beds. On Monday, Prime Minister Boris Johnson began a nationwide lockdown to be reviewed in three weeks.

France suffered a huge 28 percent increase in fatalities as it became the latest country to reach the grim milestone of 1,000 dead. The total increased from 866 to 1,100. An additional 2,516 people are on life support.

WHO Director General Dr. Tedros Adhanom insisted that it was still possible to "change the trajectory," but warned Monday that governments were failing to devote the necessary resources to the crisis. Quarantine and physical-distancing measures—introduced criminally late by governments across Europe—would help to slow the spread of the virus but were "defensive measures that will not help us to win. To win, we need to attack the virus with aggressive and targeted tactics—testing every suspected case, isolating and caring for every confirmed case, and chasing and quarantining every close contact."

Dr. Tedros warned that not enough was being done to protect frontline medical staff: "Health workers can only do their jobs effectively when they can do their jobs safely. Even if we do everything else right, if we don't prioritise protecting health workers many people will die because the health worker who could have saved their life is sick."

Faced with a public health catastrophe and given weeks' notice before the original outbreak in China became a global threat, European governments have not prepared.

COVID-19 testing remains minimal across Europe. Outside of Italy, Germany has carried out by far the most tests (167,000 as of March 15), but still substantially below the over 316,000 people tested in South Korea to bring the spread of the virus under some control. The UK had completed 90,436 tests and Norway 70,608 as of March 24, France 36,747 as of March 15, Spain 30,000 and Belgium 18,360 as of March 18. Austria, Sweden, Poland and Denmark had the next highest totals, between 10,730 and 15,613, according to *Our World in Data*. No large European country bar Norway has tested at even a third of the rate per million people as South Korea.

Tests have been unavailable as standard even for vital medical workers, who are being forced to work without basic protections.

In Italy, 4,824 health workers were known to be infected yesterday morning—9 percent of the country's active cases. In the city of Bergamo, 22 percent of family doctors are sick or quarantined and 1,464 out of 5,805

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health workers have been infected. At the Olgio Po hospital in northern Italy, 25 out of 90 doctors are infected; a fifth of the hospital's personnel have tested positive.

In Spain, 5,400 health workers had tested positive as of yesterday evening—14 percent of the country's known cases. Several hospitals are making lists of retired medical personnel aged 65 to 69—in the "at risk" category for the virus—to return to service if their wards run short of staff. At some hospitals, doctors and nurses have run out of disposable coats and are taping binbags to their arms as replacements.

Medical workers in the UK have been forced to fashion their own makeshift protective equipment. Doctors and nurses have said they feel like "cannon fodder" and "lambs to the slaughter." Yesterday, some hospitals were sent different face masks to the type they normally use, forcing staff to re-do a time-consuming mask fit test.

The apparent stupidity on the part of the ruling class has its roots in brutal commercial calculations. Everything is being done to salvage the profits of the major corporations, at the expense of lives.

While tests and personal protective equipment (PPE) remains largely unavailable, billions are on offer for big business. In Germany on Monday, Chancellor Angela Merkel's cabinet agreed a spending package worth over €750 billion. This includes €600 billion for loans to businesses and buying direct stakes in companies.

CEOs and government officials are already planning how to put workers back on the job, in patently unsafe conditions, to pay for these funds and safeguard profits.

In the UK, the government has allowed building sites to continue operating despite the nationwide lockdown. Ministers have asked employers to ensure they "follow the government guidance and practice safe social distancing on site." But builders are forced to travel on packed public transport and work on busy sites. One worker in Cambridge told the BBC he was near 300 others: "[The site] has a small smoking area, fingerprint turnstiles and a canteen not capable of the social distancing standard. The fear of the economic impact is the only reason we carry on."

In Ukraine, ArcelorMittal, the world's largest steel manufacturer and the country's largest investor, has told the government to stop short of declaring a state of national emergency, saying the company is "worried about the possible toughening of restrictive measures."

Across the continent, opposition is developing in the working class to these attempts to trade their safety for the bottom lines of executives and shareholders.

Mike Ashley, multimillionaire owner of the sportswear shop Sports Direct, yesterday tried to claim that his business provided an "essential service" to justify keeping his shops open. He was forced to back down by his workers' protests and mass public pressure, with #boycottSportsDirect the top-trending hashtag on Twitter in the UK Tuesday morning.

Amazon workers in France and Italy protested unsafe and unnecessary work at delivery warehouses. At a shipping centre near Orleans, south of Paris, 300 workers staged a strike calling for its closure. Workers at a logistics hub in Castel San Giovanni in Italy called for a strike against Amazon's refusal to slow down work.

Today, members of the Lombardy branches of the three main Italian metalworkers' unions and the region's chemical workers will carry out a one-day strike in factories not directly linked to the health sector. They said the government has given firms "excessive discretion" to apply for exemptions from a national lockdown, allowing unessential businesses to stay open. The country's bank workers have threatened a nationwide walkout over unsafe conditions.

Two opposed responses to the pandemic are taking shape. The interests of the working class lie in maintaining only essential services and production—under the safest possible conditions—while the public health crisis requires the transfer of the enormous wealth from the super-rich for testing and treatment of those infected. During this time, workers required to remain at home must receive full income and social support. The ruling class is seeking to ensure the continued functioning of the profit system, whatever the cost to workers and their families. A fight against this criminal policy requires an international mobilisation of the working class on a socialist programme.

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