

Europe's COVID-19 death toll reaches over 16,000

Robert Stevens
27 March 2020

Deaths due to COVID-19 continued to increase throughout Europe yesterday with 2,219 new fatalities across the continent. Total deaths now stand at 16,395, with 15,556 of these within the European Union's 27 member states.

Overall COVID-19 confirmed cases are approaching 300,000 in Europe, with 34,644 new cases, for a total of 283,242.

Years of slashing health and social care budgets, together with government inaction in combating the spread of the virus, have taken a grim toll, with health workers forced to make decisions as to who lives and dies.

Italy and Spain have the most fatalities in the world. In Italy, a further 622 lives were lost as the toll leapt above 8,100. The total number of cases rose by 8.2 percent to 80,589. The number in intensive care treatment rose to 3,612 from 3,489 in 24 hours.

With the 498 deaths recorded in Spain yesterday, more than 4,000 (4,145) have died of the coronavirus. The virus is taking more lives in Spain in a faster period than it did in Italy. In just 19 days Spain went from 10 to 4,089 deaths. In Italy the same leap took 25 days. From 100 cases to 56,000 took four days in Spain compared with 28 days in Italy.

Madrid is the epicentre of the pandemic in Spain. Reports attest to the dreadful circumstances facing health workers. Bloomberg noted, "In the emergency room at one of Madrid's biggest hospitals, [Dr.] Daniel Bernabeu signed the death certificate for one patient and immediately turned to help another who was choking.

"People are dying in waiting rooms before they can even be admitted as the coronavirus pandemic overpowers medical staff. With some funeral services halted in the Spanish capital and no space left in the morgues, corpses are being stored at the main ice rink."

In France there were 3,922 new cases and 365

deaths—the largest daily increase so far. Hospitals in the Paris area and in Strasbourg, in the hard-hit Alsace region of eastern France, are overflowing and starting to turn away likely COVID-19 patients.

In the Paris Public Hospitals (AP-HP) system, 628 staff, including 40 percent of doctors, have contracted the illness but many must continue working due to staff shortages. A doctor at Bichat hospital said, "There are no more beds anywhere. ... We will look for personnel everywhere and rapidly train medical students starting in the fourth year to replace the nurses we are now missing."

Brigitte Klinkert, president of the Haut-Rhin department that includes Strasbourg, confirmed to German media that hospitals in the city are so overwhelmed that they routinely refuse to give patients over 75 or even over 70 access to respiratory care. Health staff are forced to decide which patients will live or die. A nurse in Strasbourg's university hospital centre (CHU) said, "Personnel are exhausted, physically and morally. At the CHU, 238 staff are infected. More and more staff can't work, and we don't know how to handle it."

The death toll continues to rise in Britain, with fatalities up by 115—the first time deaths have jumped to more than 100 in a single day. There are now 578 dead from 11,658 confirmed cases.

As well as killing many with underlying illnesses—a constant threat to millions given that 43 percent of the UK population has a long-term health issue—the virus is taking the lives of young people with no reported health problems.

On Thursday it was confirmed that Chloe Middleton, a 21-year-old woman from High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire—and the youngest victim of the disease in the UK so far—had no underlying health problems. Even younger people are being struck. A 10-year-old girl from Plymouth was diagnosed with coronavirus. The child had a temperature of almost 107f, which caused her

to start convulsing. She did not have the persistent dry cough and is one of a growing number who have contracted COVID-19 without one of the main recognised symptoms.

The Johnson Conservative government, having done nothing for weeks as it planned for the population to be infected by the tens of millions in its “herd immunity” policy—is preparing for mass deaths. It has deployed the military to help transform London’s Excel conference and events centre into a 4,000-bed hospital, including two emergency morgues. Yesterday the army delivered oxygen supplies to the centre ahead of its opening on April 4 when an initial 500 patients will be treated. Nearby London City Airport is closed to civilian flights to enable military planes to fly in and out.

According to reports, similar “field hospitals” will be created in major UK cities, including at the National Exhibition Centre in Birmingham and Manchester’s Convention Centre. Sky News reported that a temporary mortuary is being set up at a British military site in Belfast “to cope with an anticipated spike in coronavirus deaths.”

This week saw the deaths of the first two prisoners in Britain—an 84-year-old man at Littlehey prison in Cambridgeshire and a 66-year-old man at Strangeways, Manchester.

The callous attitude of the Tory government towards National Health Service (NHS) workers on the front line trying to save lives—many still without personal protective equipment—was made clear in the comments of chief executive of NHS Providers, Chris Hopson, that London hospitals were facing a “continuous tsunami” of coronavirus patients. He warned, “The CEOs [of the various NHS providers] are concerned that all that extra capacity is now being used up very, very quickly. We’ve got the surge capacity at the ExCel centre but this is filling up very quickly.”

Due to there being no social distancing in place for weeks, and a government policy not to test NHS staff, many are ill having possibly contracted COVID-19 and are in self-isolation at home, with up to 50 percent of staff off sick in some London trusts.

On Thursday at 8 p.m., people around the UK—replicating what has been done in other countries—clapped and cheered NHS workers from their doors, windows and balconies, with others coming into their streets to do the same as part of a “Clap For Our Carers” campaign. In a staggering show of hypocrisy, Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Chancellor Rishi

Sunak emerged from Number 10 and 11 Downing Street to join the applause.

Shortly after, on the BBC’s “Question Time” TV show, Richard Horton, the editor-in-chief of the *Lancet* medical journal said the situation was “a national scandal. We shouldn’t be in this position. We knew in the last week of January that this was coming. The message from China was absolutely clear that a new virus with pandemic potential was hitting cities ... and people admitted to intensive care units and dying and the mortality was growing.

“We knew that 11 weeks ago. And then we wasted February when we could have acted. Time when we could have ramped up testing, time when we could have got Personal Protective Equipment ready and disseminated. We didn’t do it.”

Speaking of Johnson and Sunak, he said, “The hypocrisy of clapping NHS workers and yet not supporting those NHS workers when they go into that front line is tragic and it was preventable.”

In Britain, employers are able to tap a pool of £350 billion for starters, with “unlimited” funds pledged by Sunak. In contrast, with more than 1 million workers already laid off, in the space of a week over 500,000 thousand people have been forced to apply for £73 a week via the Universal Credit benefits system. Many were forced to give up trying, as claims can only be made online and they were faced with a queue of 145,000 others waiting to log on to the website.

Those attempting to make contact regarding their claims failed, despite also calling by phone, in some cases, between 80 and 100 times. Even if laid off and redundant workers do succeed in making a claim, the brutal UC system means they will wait at least five weeks to get a first payment.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact