

EU divisions erupt as anger mounts among workers over COVID-19 response

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Amid the surging death toll and mounting anger at the official handling of the COVID-19 pandemic among workers, bitter divisions are erupting between the European Union (EU) powers over how to finance massive bailouts granted to their banks and major corporations. It is clear that no faction of the European ruling class offers a way forward to fight the pandemic. Instead, COVID-19 is exposing the political rot left by decades of social austerity and bitter inter-imperialist conflicts between the major EU powers.

Yesterday, as the world total of COVID-19 cases climbed to 721,277, and the United States led the world with 141,781 cases, Europe collectively had 382,823 identified cases of coronavirus. The European death toll had mounted to 24,138. These figures largely underestimate the number of the sick and the dead, as several European countries including France and Spain have already acknowledged that they deliberately do not count those who fall sick or die of COVID-19 at home or in retirement homes.

Since nationwide wildcat strikes in Italy and walkouts across Europe forced governments to implement confinement orders demanded by health authorities, Italy, France, Spain, Britain and large parts of Germany are on lockdown. Nevertheless, governments and major corporations continue to press workers in industries like auto, steel, and aerospace not essential to supplying the population with food and medicine to go to work, to boost corporate profits and the wealth of the financial aristocracy.

COVID-19 keeps spreading faster than it would amid a tighter confinement policy, prolonging the pandemic and increasing the number of cases by thousands. This weekend, according to official statistics, saw 15,449 new recorded cases in Spain, 13,757 in Germany, 11,883 in Italy, 8,420 in France, 5,401 in Britain, and 2,331 in the Netherlands. Italy saw a record 1,808 COVID-19 deaths,

Spain 1,617, France 618, Britain 441, the Netherlands 205, and Germany 166.

An explosive confrontation is emerging between the European financial aristocracy and the working class. Anger is mounting among factory and service workers against employers' attempts to force them to work, and among health workers against EU austerity measures that have slashed tens of billions of euros from state health budgets.

Rubén Herrera, a nurse in Alcalá de Henares, told Spain's *El País* that with Madrid-area hospitals overwhelmed with severely ill COVID-19 patients, "We are working like in a war movie, with soldiers coming out of the trenches, that is the sort of medicine we do: as if it were wartime... We only think about the next seven or ten hours we have before us, hoping the emergency room will not collapse and that everyone can be protected..."

"None of this would be happening this way without the cuts and privatizations, if in 2012 they had not cut 120 beds and 90 jobs from this hospital, and 2,100 beds and at least 2,200 health workers less in the entire region."

After a video went viral on Italian social media of a father giving his daughter a piece of bread, and warning that the population could attack supermarkets if they ran out of money to buy food, ruling circles are warning that riots could erupt across major EU cities in the coming weeks. Italian officials are reportedly posting guards outside supermarkets across southern Italy. However, similar problems face broader layers of temporary, self-employed and other precarious workers who have emerged across Europe, especially since the 2008 crisis.

Francesco Rocca, head of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent societies (IFRC), told the UN: "We have a lot of people who are living very marginalized, in the so-called black hole of society... In the most difficult neighborhoods of the biggest cities, I am afraid that in a few weeks we will have social

problems. This is a social bomb that can explode at any moment, because they don't have any way to have an income."

Rocca added that he thought "major Western cities" could see mass unrest "in a few weeks."

The confrontation emerging between the working class and the European police states set up by the financial aristocracy has revolutionary implications. The claim that there is no money to carry out a struggle against the pandemic is absurd. However, the necessary resources to halt the COVID-19 pandemic and maintain the distribution of essential food and medical supplies across international supply chains requires the expropriation of the financial aristocracy.

Figures like Bernard Arnault (France, 2019 net worth: \$106.8 billion), Armancio Ortega (Spain, \$67.2 billion), Françoise Bettencourt Meyers (France, \$49.3 billion), Karl Albrecht (Germany, \$36.1 billion), Jim Ratcliffe (UK, \$32 billion) or Giovanni Ferrero (Italy, \$22.4 billion) and countless lesser financial aristocrats have plundered hundreds of billions from workers since 2008 alone. As an urgent matter of saving lives and maintaining public health, such fortunes must be impounded and used to plan a coordinated global response to the pandemic.

The pursuit of such a policy falls to the European and international working class, in struggle against capitalism and for a socialist reorganization of society. It cannot be waged in alliance with any faction of the ruling class. The EU's COVID-19 summit last Thursday in Brussels failed miserably. The pandemic has deeply split the EU, bringing to the fore the unresolved national conflicts between the EU powers revealed by the 2008 crisis and threatening to blow them apart.

The heads of state summit collapsed after German, Dutch and Austrian officials refused demands from Italian and Spanish officials, echoing a joint statement signed with France, to jointly borrow money on credit markets to fund corporate bailouts. In response, Italian Prime Minister Conte refused to accept Berlin's demands that COVID-19 bank bailouts be financed by the European Stability Mechanism (ESM). Borrowing from this fund, which imposed draconian austerity on Greece after 2008 as a precondition for lending it money to bail out EU banks, would allow the EU to impose similar conditions on Italy.

The summit provoked anger in Italian media, including in pro-EU dailies. The *Corriere della Sera* wrote, "If the EU does not get together, the European project is finished", while *La Repubblica* concluded that the EU is

an "ugly Europe."

In France, 94-year-old former head of the EU Commission Jacques Delors returned from retirement to warn that the EU could collapse: "The climate that seems to prevail among heads of state and the lack of European solidarity are a mortal danger to the EU. The microbe is back." French President Emmanuel Macron, who declared during the Thursday summit that the EU's survival was at stake, gave a joint interview Saturday to Italy's *Corriere della Sera*, *La Repubblica* and *La Stampa*, calling for "strong European solidarity on health and budget issues."

Conte granted a lead interview to *El Pais*, warning that "the EU is nearing a point of no return in terms of losing the confidence of its citizens."

Whether or not the EU powers cobble together some deal on funding their bailouts, the policy pursued by the European bourgeoisie will be hostile to the working class. The EU powers plan to hand hundreds of billions of euros to the banks and major corporations, from €756 billion in Germany to €300 billion in France or €200 billion in Spain, leaving crumbs for unemployment and other key social programs. Nor do these bailouts involve retooling industry to mass produce masks, medical equipment and other key supplies to fight COVID-19.

The southern European bourgeoisie's conflicts with Berlin involve not an attempt to save the population, but to save their own increasingly unstable wealth. They are desperate to obtain Berlin's assistance to ensure they can borrow money on good terms because—with Italy's sovereign debt at 150 percent of GDP and France's at nearly 100 percent—they are bankrupt in all but name.

The working class cannot let itself be tied to any of the reactionary national camps within the European bourgeoisie. Amid growing anger and a developing radicalization of the workers, the way forward requires putting lives ahead of profits, expropriating the vast wealth of the super-rich that is needed to protect humanity, and adopting an internationally-coordinated plan against COVID-19 that leads towards socialism.



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