

Ireland woefully unprepared for COVID-19 onslaught

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As the death toll from the coronavirus surges in Europe, Irish Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Leo Varadkar announced last Friday that the government would escalate lockdown measures that have brought the country to a standstill. Varadkar stated that all gatherings outside of a single household are now prohibited. Additionally, Gardai (police) have been given powers to “increase intervention” to enforce compliance with the stay-at-home orders.

On Friday, the Irish Health Service Executive (HSE), the overall governing body dealing with the spread of the pandemic, announced that 424 new cases had been detected with 4,273 people now infected with the COVID-19 virus. The total number of deaths from the virus in Ireland now stands at 120.

Medical experts have repeatedly insisted that up to 15,000 tests a day are needed to stem COVID-19’s spread throughout the country. Just over 4,500 are currently being conducted daily. According to Cillian De Gascun, chairman of the HSE’s coronavirus advisory group, only 1,500-2,000 of these tests are able to be processed in the labs each day.

State broadcaster RTE reported on April 1 that bereaved families were suffering, because in at least two cases in nursing homes, people have died of COVID-19 while waiting for test results.

Ultan Power, a professor of molecular virology at Queen’s University Belfast, stated that 6,000 people could be diagnosed as critical cases in Ireland within the next three weeks. A surge in deaths is predicted to coincide with the rise in cases. Temporary mortuary facilities are being prepared to handle the surge.

RTE reported last week that in preparation for the surge in cases the government instructed HSE to find 10,000 beds, which may include student accommodation, hotel rooms and military barracks.

The HSE has also opened step-down isolation wards at Dublin’s Citywest hotel and conference centre to deal with the overflow of patients from the hospital system. Croke Park, Ireland’s largest football stadium, has been transformed into a test centre for the coronavirus along with 41 other centres throughout the country.

There were warnings last week from the European Centre for Disease Control that the intensive care system in Irish hospitals would not be able to cope with rising numbers of coronavirus patients in a critical condition.

Only 301 beds were available at the start of the pandemic. A study commissioned by the HSE more than a decade ago indicated that to remain at normal capacity, 500 intensive care unit (ICU) beds would be needed under these circumstances. Varadkar’s government has only been able to acquire 47 ICU beds from private hospitals in addition to nine laboratories and 194 ventilators. Medical experts have warned that the lack of ICU beds will seriously hamper the hospital’s ability to fight against the virus.

Professor John Crown, an oncology consultant described the situation: “We have unprecedented small numbers of intensive care unit beds, intensive care unit doctors and specialists in every area.”

Like every other country hit by the virus, Ireland is suffering from both a social and economic crisis. Coronavirus job losses have multiplied at a staggering rate over the last two weeks, with the unemployment rate already at 18 percent. Under a job protection scheme revealed by Varadkar last week, the government has said it will pay 70 percent of wages in private companies hit by the pandemic. The proposal would cost the state €3.7 billion over the next three months.

The spread of COVID-19 has coincided with a

political crisis in Ireland stemming from the results of the general election held on February 8, which resulted in neither of the main establishment parties, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, being able to form a government. The combined votes in the 160 seat Dáil (parliament) of both nationalist parties, which for 100 years have dominated electoral politics, fell to a historic low. Based on first preference votes but not seats, the election was won by Sinn Féin.

Varadkar's government was already facing growing opposition from workers before the coronavirus crisis took hold. Fine Gael, with the compliance of Fianna Fáil, has been slicing off sections of the public health service to the private hospital sector for over a decade, while at the same time placing embargos on nursing recruitment in public hospitals.

In February last year, tens of thousands of people turned out in Dublin in support of the nurses' campaign of one-day stoppages for pay and improvements to tackle recruitment and retention issues. Over 10,000 health workers went on strike last June against underfunding and low pay.

Between 2008 and 2014, successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael governments introduced a massive €2.7 billion of health service cuts. Now, as the infection figures rise, a staggering 25 percent of those testing positive with the virus are health care workers.

The selflessness of health workers is widely apparent. Over 50,000 people with various experience in working in the health service have volunteered to help in the fight against the coronavirus.



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