

European governments plot return to work in midst of pandemic

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With daily COVID-19 death tolls still in the high hundreds, new cases in the thousands, health services stretched to the breaking point and the supply of tests and protective equipment wholly inadequate, European governments are preparing to send their populations back to work.

A leaked internal Home Office phone call confirms that the UK's discredited and nominally abandoned policy of "herd immunity" is still government policy. In a discussion obtained by the *Byline Times*—in connection with the Home Office sending 2,000 workers back to their offices next week—the department's deputy science advisor, Rupert Shute, is recorded as saying:

"It's perfectly okay to carry on around your business. And it's vitally important that you do as there's a whole bunch of supply chains and the economy that needs to continue running... I keep coming back to this point that we are all going to get this [coronavirus] at some point... we can't hide away from it forever, but we can manage the way in which we are exposed..."

"It's certainly not something we're going to be able to squash and eliminate. The current interventions are to see within [indecipherable] a few weeks whether we can find a method of managing it within the population. That is just a managing of it, that is not an elimination of it."

He continued: "Talk for the moment is around a peak and managing the current outbreak. This doesn't mean that there isn't going to be second, third, fourth, fifth or even more peaks as we go into many months and many years... We're going to have to get used to a different way of living with this at home and at work."

Shute states bluntly the policy being settled on by governments across Europe.

In Spain, nonessential construction and industrial workers are being told to return to their sites and factories next week, with face masks handed out at metro and train stations. On Wednesday, a spokesperson for the Spanish

government said, "From April 26, citizens will be able to get back to their normal lives," adding as an afterthought that they were "working with different possibilities for the restrictions." Italian Health Minister Roberto Speranza said this week, "Our task is to create the conditions to live with the virus." As *Daily Telegraph* columnist Fraser Nelson, who is advocating for a swift return to work in Britain, put it more openly, "That's another way of bracing Italy for an increase in Covid deaths as the price of returning, slowly, towards normal life." Some companies and shops in Italy are due to return to business on April 13 and a return to offices is planned from May 4, according to *Bloomberg*.

Ruling circles in Germany are working towards the same plan, with Chancellor Angela Merkel also speaking of the need "to live with the pandemic for a considerable time." A leaked interior ministry document outlines a series of measures nominally designed to allow public life to resume safely once the country's lockdown ends April 19. Armin Laschet, the Christian Democratic Union minister-president of North Rhine-Westphalia, has encouraged the staged opening of small retail spaces, car sales branches and even restaurants, as long as "proper distancing can be maintained."

French Prime Minister Édouard Philippe has raised the possibility of relaxing lockdown measures on a region-by-region basis and "subject to a new testing policy—depending, possibly, on age and other factors."

Daniel Camus, a professor at the Pasteur Institute in Lille, explained that this would be "complicated to do in practice." Referring to the northeastern region of France hit earliest and hardest by the virus, he continued, "Even there, a large part of the population will not yet be immune to the virus. We cannot tell them to go out on the street and expose themselves to the risk of being contaminated. People would say, 'I don't want to be sent off to the slaughterhouse like that.' They wouldn't listen

to that kind of strategy.”

The reference to a “slaughterhouse” is grimly appropriate. As plans were being hatched over how to impose a return to work, over 4,000 new deaths were reported for Europe Friday, bringing the total for the pandemic on the continent to over 70,000. Italy reported 570 deaths, bringing its total to 18,849. Spain registered an increase of 605 to 15,970. France counted 987 new fatalities, with the overall total now standing at 13,197.

The UK reported 980 deaths, its largest daily total to date and higher than any recorded so far in a single day by Italy or Spain. This brings total fatalities in Britain to 8,958. Sir Patrick Vallance, the government’s chief scientific advisor, said he estimated the peak to still be two weeks away. The army has plans to construct nine additional field hospitals and is considering a further eight sites. Germany also recorded its highest daily number of deaths, 266, raising the overall total to 2,373, and marked its fourth consecutive day of increases in the number of daily infections. The crisis could soon explode in some of the population’s most vulnerable sections, as refugee centres housing hundreds of people are put into quarantine. The country’s mortality rate for the virus has risen from 0.6 percent a fortnight ago to 2.1 percent today.

The real death toll in Europe is significantly higher. A horrific picture is emerging of the largely unreported deaths continent-wide of thousands of neglected elderly residents in care homes.

In France, almost a third of officially recorded COVID-19-related deaths have been of care home residents. Over 2,300 homes have reported at least one case of coronavirus infection. At one home in Mougins, southeastern France, 31 people, a third of the residents, died since March 20.

Italy’s Higher Health Institute (ISS) reports that 3,859 people who tested positive for the virus and 1,310 who showed possible symptoms have died in care homes since February 1. The ISS’s head epidemiologist, Giovanni Rezza, admitted earlier this week that these figures were likely to be underestimates, given that very few tests had been carried out in the sector.

Two care home workers have been killed by the virus in Spain and another 400 infected.

In Germany, there are reports of deaths in care homes across the country in the hundreds. In the northern city of Wolfsburg, 29 out of 160 residents at a care home died after 74 became infected.

In the UK, industry group Care England estimates that deaths across the country’s nursing homes are likely to be

close to 1,000 already. Care sector bodies and the Alzheimer’s Society charity believe the virus is present in half of the UK’s care environments, which look after 400,000 elderly people. Homes across the country are announcing dozens of infections and deaths.

Health care systems are stretched to the breaking point. At least 100 doctors in Italy have been killed by the virus, along with 30 nurses. Roughly 10 percent of those infected in Italy are estimated to work in health care. Twenty NHS doctors and nurses have suffered the same fate in Britain.

Spain has not released official figures for the number of health care workers who have tested positive for the virus, but they account for 12 percent of the country’s cases. At least five health care personnel are known to have died.

France has also recorded the deaths of at least five doctors in connection with the virus.

Europe’s lockdowns have severe economic consequences, which fall overwhelmingly on the working class. In the UK, 1.2 million people have made welfare claims in the last three weeks, a sevenfold increase since March 16. Some 900,000 workers lost their jobs in Spain in that time, and banks report being inundated with thousands of requests for mortgage breaks.

The reckless return to work being planned across Europe is not intended to alleviate those pressures. It is designed to make the working class bear the costs of a public health catastrophe in order to restart the flow of profits to the banks and major corporations.



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