

“I have lost faith in the system itself”

Fired researcher Mauro Ferrari denounces EU inaction on COVID-19

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13 April 2020

Last week, on April 7, distinguished nanomedicine researcher Mauro Ferrari was forced to resign as European Research Council (ERC) president. The ERC’s Scientific Council opposed his efforts to mobilize scientists across the European Union (EU) in a coordinated fight against COVID-19.

The ouster of Ferrari provides a devastating indictment of the political and, one might add, moral bankruptcy of European capitalism. In his resignation letter, Ferrari denounced the EU’s calculated inaction in the pandemic, which is still surging with nearly one million cases and over 80,000 deaths in Europe, long after coordinated public health measures contained outbreaks in China and South Korea. Worldwide, there are already over 1.8 million COVID-19 cases and 113,000 deaths.

Ferrari begins his letter, “Please forgive me, but I believe that the priority now is to stop the pandemic. The priority is to save millions of lives. ... I believe in science at the service of society, especially when it counts the most. And now it does count the most, since it is only through science that COVID-19, and its successor pandemics, will ever be defeated.”

He became ERC president in January 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic began. Hailing from a working class area of Udine in Italy, Ferrari earned his doctorate in mechanical engineering and did research in America, moving into biomedical science after his first wife Mariluisa suddenly died of cancer in 1995. Last year, the ERC said it “wholeheartedly” supported his nomination as president, praising Ferrari’s “career as an accomplished scientist and leader in the USA, with a rich and diverse background in the field of research and its applications.”

Ferrari returned to Europe to lead the ERC, he writes in his resignation, based on a “commitment to the idealistic dream of a United Europe and my belief in serving the needs of the world.”

However, he adds, “Those idealistic motivations were crushed by a very different reality, in the brief three months since I took office. Disquieting early warning signs gave way to the painfully icy, cold recognitions of a world entirely different from what I had envisioned. The COVID-19 pandemic shone a merciless light on how mistaken I had been. In time of emergencies people, and institutions, revert to their deepest nature and reveal their true character.”

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the EU as a corrupt tool of the capitalist aristocracy, indifferent to the fate of millions. While the European Central Bank gave a €750 billion bailout to the banks, followed by multihundred-billion-euro bailouts by each major euro zone country, EU officials insisted they would not stop the spread of this deadly disease. Instead, they would allow it to infect the population, hoping surviving masses of workers would acquire what UK officials called “herd immunity.” With stunning indifference to human life, German Chancellor Angela Merkel calmly predicted that 70-90 percent of Germans (56-72 million people) would fall ill.

The EU adopted beggar-thy-neighbor policies, with Berlin and Paris refusing to export key medical supplies to countries like Italy worst hit by COVID-19. This placed the EU on a collision course with scientists who argued for a coordinated international struggle against COVID-19 and for treating the sick. Ferrari explains:

As it became evident that the pandemic would be a

tragedy of possibly unprecedented proportions, I moved that the European Research Council should establish a special program directed at combating Covid-19. I believed this was justified by the expected burden of death, suffering, societal transformation, and economic devastation, especially striking the less fortunate, the weakest in the societies of the world. I thought that at a time like this, the very best scientists in the world should be provided with resources and opportunities to fight the pandemic, with new drugs, new vaccines, new diagnostic tools, new behavioral dynamic approaches based on science, to replace the oft-improvised intuitions of political leaders.

His proposals, Ferrari writes, were “passed on to different layers of the European Commission administration, where I believe they disintegrated upon impact. I have been extremely disappointed by the European response to COVID-19 ... the complete absence of coordination of health care policies among member states, the recurrent opposition to cohesive financial support initiatives, the pervasive one-sided border closures, and the marginal scale of synergistic scientific initiatives.”

The fact that Ferrari had illusions in the EU as he became ERC president gives his judgment of the EU today, based on the bitter experience of the last three months, all the more force.

While pledging to “continue to provide my most conscientious advice, in a public and transparent manner,” Ferrari writes, “I am afraid that I have seen enough of both the governance of science, and the political operations at the European Union. In these three long months, I have indeed met many excellent and committed individuals at different levels of the organization of the ERC and the EC. However, I have lost faith in the system itself.”

An examination of the ERC’s statement on its ouster of Ferrari vindicates his criticisms. Turning 180 degrees from its earlier praise of Ferrari’s scientific record, it claims he “displayed a complete lack of appreciation for the *raison-d’être* of the ERC” to fund research proposed by researchers themselves. At the same time, it issues insinuating criticisms of him for spending “extensive time in the USA,” making “personal initiatives” to the EU Commission, and meeting with “external enterprises, some academic and some commercial” to discuss the pandemic.

The ERC statement also defends its own record, claiming that it is “already very active in developing new programs,” including one on COVID-19.

This is a pathetic dodge. The ERC statement estimates that its support for coronavirus research over the years has reached “a total value of about €100 million.” This means that though COVID-19 threatens to kill millions and make hundreds of millions jobless worldwide, the ERC is dedicating about 0.1 percent of its €100 billion Horizon Europe fund to fighting it. In the meantime, the EU is plunging countless hundreds of billions of euros into the pockets of the superrich.

Sorbonne University President Jean Chambaz, a leading supporter of French President Emmanuel Macron’s unpopular university reforms, penned a letter as head of the League of European Research Universities (LERU) attacking Ferrari. In it Chambaz, the son of a central committee member of the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF), lectured Ferrari on “the significance of independent bottom-up research” and the ERC’s role to “support this open and free research.”

Chambaz also took the opportunity to defend the ERC’s record on COVID-19 and appeal for more EU funding for the ERC. “It is admired worldwide for its success. It should be supported even more in the investment plan that the European Union is framing to exit the present crisis.”

Ferrari’s ouster testifies to the impossibility of fighting for a rational, scientific and international policy against COVID-19 through the existing European institutions. It is the working class that imposed public health measures to stop the pandemic in Europe. Mass wildcat strikes and walkouts in factories led to the initial shelter-at-home policies in Italy and France. Mobilizing all society’s scientific and industrial resources to fight COVID-19 will require the mobilization of the working class across Europe against the EU in a struggle for state power.



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