Deaths continue to soar as European governments step up back-to-work plans

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Even as coronavirus death tolls continue to rise across the continent, workers in several European countries are being forced back to work. In Spain and Italy this is already underway, and in other countries timeframes are being proposed for sending the population back to workplaces.

An additional 3,328 deaths across Europe brought total fatalities to 83,317, with 29,107 people remaining in a "serious, critical" condition. Another 27,531 cases of the virus were announced Tuesday, bring the total to nearly one million (934,917).

In Spain, many non-essential workers were forced back to work this week after the Easter public holiday, even while hundreds more were dying. Estimates are that between 300,000 and four million workers were forced back to shops, factories, construction sites and offices.

A further 567 people perished in Spain yesterday, on the second day back—up from 517 the previous day—with the total now standing at 18,056. In all, 172,541 infections have been reported in the country, which has the second-highest figure in the world after the United States.

The Socialist Party/Podemos government pledged to make 10 million face masks available for free this week, with police officers and Red Cross volunteers handing them out to commuters at railway and metro stations. Many workers doubt the efficacy of such measures under conditions in which they are forced to work in close contact with colleagues. "I don't know why … we have to go back if there's no way of staying apart," Rafael Antúnez, a construction worker in Madrid, told the media.

Despite the spread of the pandemic, the ruling elites and corporate media in Germany are waging an aggressive campaign to reopen the economy. Yesterday, Christian Democratic Union (CDU) Federal Minister of Health Jens Spahn stated, "In the end, it is a matter of finding the right balance between health protection, public life and the economy." There would be "cautious first steps" towards a new normality. "It's about living with the virus and learning to live with it."

The heads of German state governments will meet with Chancellor Angela Merkel today to discuss how to proceed. The major obstacle the ruling class faces as it seeks to implement its criminal "profits before lives" policy is the massive opposition in the working class. According to a survey conducted by the opinion research institute Civey, a large proportion of the German population is for continuing or even intensifying the confinement rules against the pandemic.

The researchers asked the question: "How do you rate the measures taken by politicians to combat the corona pandemic?" 56 percent of the respondents answered that they considered the rules to be appropriate. 29 percent consider them "rather insufficient" or "clearly insufficient." Just under 15 percent consider the social distancing measures taken by the government to be "rather excessive" or "clearly excessive."

Germany reported 285 new deaths Tuesday, bringing the total to 3,524. Over 1,200 new infections were announced, bringing total infections to 131,359—one of the highest numbers in Europe.

In Austria, which has been relatively mildly affected by the pandemic compared to other European countries, due in large part to more widespread testing, smaller non-essential shops and businesses as well as garden centres and DIY stores reopened yesterday. Larger department stores and shopping malls are set to open from May 1, while restaurants and hotels could resume operations from the middle of May, Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz said.

There has been a partial easing of restrictions in the Czech Republic, where some shops reopened last week, and in Denmark, whose government officials announced that some schools and day-care centres would open again today.

Italy has the second highest death toll in the world, at 21,067, with 602 new deaths yesterday. Non-essential shops selling stationery, books and clothes were allowed to reopen on Monday, although most businesses will be closed until May 4. The northern provinces of Lombardy and Piedmont, two of the worst-hit regions in the country, remain under full lockdown.

The Guardia di Finanza and NAS Health and Hygiene Police raided dozens of care homes across Italy, blaming the deaths of hundreds of residents on a failure of staff to wear protective equipment. In Milan's Pio Albergo Trivulzio care home alone, 143 residents have died of the virus. The heads of several homes have been placed under investigation on suspicion of culpable negligence.

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In a televised address Monday, French President Emmanuel Macron extended current lockdown measures until May 11, after which some schools and childcare facilities are set to reopen to allow parents of young children to return to work.

Macron's address came a day after the National Institute of Health and Medical Research in Paris issued a study warning of a second peak in cases if lockdown measures were lifted too soon, without adequate testing and contact-tracing procedures in place. The study cautioned that if lockdown measures were loosened by the end of May or even June, unless a massive programme of testing and isolation of those infected were implemented, France would see a surge in cases requiring 40 times the current level of intensive care unit (ICU) beds.

The working class across the continent continue to pay the price for the criminal lack of preparedness by European governments and the unsafe conditions under which many are forced to work, with medical workers in particular being infected and dying in droves. This will be exacerbated by the raft of back-to-work orders.

On Tuesday, France passed a grim milestone, more than 100,000 COVID-19 infections. The nation's death toll is among the highest in Europe, with yesterday's 762 new fatalities bringing the total to 15,729 deaths—5,400 of these occurring in social care locations such as retirement homes.

In Spain, 26,672 healthcare workers have become infected since the start of the pandemic, roughly 15 percent of total cases in the country. According to Spanish media, the unofficial death toll among medical workers is at least 26.

On Monday night, London Mayor Sadiq Khan reported that 21 transport workers in the capital had died from COVID-19, including 15 London bus workers. Shedding crocodile tears over the lives lost, Khan stated that the news "breaks my heart," while insisting that transport workers would still not be given personal protective equipment (PPE) unless "advice from public health experts changes."

This is in line with the Conservative government's PPE Plan, published on April 10, which maintains that transport workers, among other sections of the workforce, do not require protective masks.

There is growing and widespread outrage in Britain over the government's refusal to provide adequate protective gear, including to frontline workers in the National Health Service (NHS) who deal directly with the sick. At least 41 healthcare workers have so far died of COVID-19.

NHS workers and supporters from the Health Worker Coronavirus Activists Group have called for a "Day of Action" tomorrow to protest the lack of protective equipment, and are demanding Health Secretary Matt Hancock's resignation.

Professor Helen Ward, of the Imperial College London Department of Infectious Disease Epidemiology, expressed the growing anger of workers and scientists across the UK at the government's criminal response to the pandemic, tweeting Monday:

"It's very sad that so many people have died and so many more are desperately ill because politicians refused to listen to advice. We said lockdown earlier, we said test, trace, isolate. But they decided they knew better. There will be a reckoning, and it will not be forgiving."

Professor Ward told the *Mirror*: "There was a lack of testing, lack of PPE, lack of ventilators and the lack of hospital beds and NHS capacity—a result of 10 years of cuts."

Total coronavirus deaths in UK hospitals reached 12,107, with another 778 fatalities reported. However, this is a gross underestimate, as the government still refuses to include deaths outside of hospital in its daily statistics. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) reported yesterday that between the beginning of the outbreak late last year and April 3, it has recorded 6,235 coronavirus-related deaths in England and Wales—around 2,100 more than Department of Health hospital figures for the same period, or 50 percent higher.

One in 10 coronavirus deaths in the week up to April 3 occurred outside of hospitals, the ONS reported, with 406 extra deaths occurring that week not recorded in the government's figures.

More than half of these deaths occurred in care homes, which are being ravaged by the pandemic. Ninety-two separate care homes reported outbreaks just in the 24 hours up to the government's daily coronavirus briefing on Monday evening, with over 2,200 homes now reporting at least one case.

These figures mean that in the week ending April 3, the UK recorded its highest-ever weekly death total since records began in 2005—with 16,387 deaths—over one-fifth of which (21 percent) named coronavirus on the death certificate.

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