

European states demand return to work as COVID-19 cases top 1 million

Johannes Stern, Alex Lantier
17 April 2020

The number of confirmed COVID-19 cases across Europe surged to more than one million yesterday, rising 40,612 to 1,011,369, as governments across the continent intensified pressure on workers to end confinement measures and return to work.

While shelter-at-home orders and school and plant closures in Europe have limited COVID-19's spread, the pandemic is raging. After the number of new cases in Spain fell several days running to 3,961 on April 14, it suddenly nearly doubled to 6,599 the following day—Spain's ongoing return to work will accelerate the contagion.

France announced 753 deaths yesterday and a record number of new cases, rising 17,164 to 165,027. It was Britain, however, that recorded the most deaths, 861, as 4,617 new cases brought the UK total to 103,093, the sixth country to pass the 100,000 case mark.

This underscores the politically criminal character of repeated calls from European governments for a return to work in coming days and weeks. With Spain having already ended shelter-at home orders for industrial workers on Monday, Italian workers are gradually returning to work with a final target date of May 4, and Germany and France have announced a return to work on May 4 and May 11, respectively.

Testifying before the French Senate, the president of France's Scientific Council, Jean-François Delfraissy, predicted that a return to normalcy would rapidly lead to an explosion of new daily cases, which typically ranged from 2,000 to 4,000 during the lockdown, to 10,000 to 15,000.

This week, a report from France's National Institutes of Health and Research (INSERM) warned of the dangers posed by return to work orders. "Ending shelter-at-home orders without an exit strategy would lead to a second wave of the pandemic that would completely swamp the hospital sector," they wrote, adding: "The maximum

number of intensive care beds is estimated at over 40 times capacity if there is not a clear strategy after the end of the lockdown." While French President Emmanuel Macron called for reopening schools next month, experts urge waiting until September.

"We do not yet have a clear vision of how the epidemic will develop in coming weeks," commented Professor Renaud Piarroux of the Pitié-Salpêtrière hospital in Paris, who said Macron's call for a return to work on May 11 was "a sort of bet."

Britain announced a three-week extension of its lockdown put in place on March 23 as public health workers continue to contract and die from COVID-19. Last Sunday, a pregnant 28-year-old nurse, Mary Agyeiwaa Anyapong, died after giving birth by caesarean section. The Nursing Notes organization also refuted government claims that 27 UK medical staff have died, whereas the true figure is 56: "We believe the difference stems from an omission of unregistered staff, locums/agency workers, allied health professionals, and social care."

In Germany, after a video conference on Wednesday, Chancellor Angela Merkel and the prime ministers of the different German states agreed on a package of measures to gradually reduce the restrictions that have been in place until now to contain the spread of the pandemic.

According to the German government's decision paper, the "decrees issued so far" such as social distancing regulations and contact restrictions will be "extended until May 3," but schools are to be gradually reopened from May 4 at the latest. Initially, everyday school life is to begin in the highest elementary school classes, graduating classes and classes that will take exams next year. Also, at universities, examinations are to be held and libraries and archives opened.

In the German retail sector, shops with sales areas of up to 800 square meters will be able to reopen as early as

next week, “as well as car dealers, bicycle dealers, bookstores, regardless of the sales area.” Among service providers “where physical proximity is essential, hairdressers should first prepare themselves to resume operations from May 4.”

The Germany government’s central goal, however, is to boost the economy and resume production, especially in the auto industry. The paper complains that in many cases “production problems and production stoppages have occurred in recent weeks independently of ordered closures because essential components were no longer supplied.”

Germany’s federal and state governments are now primarily tasked with supporting the economy by “restoring disrupted international supply chains.”

In order to lull the population into a false sense of security, the paper emphasizes that the restoration of “public life” and “disrupted value chains” must be “well prepared” and “accompanied in each individual case by protective measures in such a way that the emergence of new infection chains is avoided as far as possible.” The aim is “to ensure that health care facilities and nursing staff are fully supplied with medical masks that protect the wearers from infection.”

In other words, federal and state governments are preparing to ramp up the economy and public life and produce an explosion of new cases, even though there is not even a sufficient supply of medically adequate protective masks in the health care system! In fact, more and more hospitals are becoming hotspots of the COVID-19 epidemic. Due to the dramatic lack of protective equipment, more than 2,300 doctors and nurses have already become infected in German hospitals alone, according to the Robert Koch Institute (RKI).

“We must secure the successes we have achieved,” Merkel demanded at a joint press conference with Finance Minister Olaf Scholz (Social Democratic Party—SPD), Bavarian Prime Minister Markus Söder (Christian Social Union—CSU) and Hamburg Mayor Peter Tschentscher (SPD). One wonders what the Chancellor is talking about? Germany recorded over 300 deaths on Tuesday and Wednesday. On Thursday another 248 deaths were reported bringing the death toll to 4,052, far more than the 3,342 recorded in China, the original epicenter of the pandemic.

The policies of European banks and governments are setting them on a collision course with the working class. It was a wave of wildcat strikes and spontaneous walkouts by workers in Italy that forced the initial adoption of

quarantine and shelter-at-home orders in Italy that then expanded across Europe. The European Union’s (EU) decades-long record of austerity and health care cuts stands utterly discredited. Nevertheless, banks and major corporations are working closely with the trade unions to plot a return to work to boost profits at the expense of workers’ lives.

While polls in France, Spain and Germany have all shown 80 percent of the population supporting shelter-at-home orders, there is little doubt that the bourgeoisie across Europe would prefer to order masses of workers back to work, and for many to their deaths, as soon as possible.

Merkel is calling for reopening international supply chains, however, under conditions where restarting production depends on reopening plants across southern Europe that were shut down by mass walkouts or strikes.

Last month, the French financial consultancy Rexecode warned of the international impact of “COVID-19 confinement of parts of northern Italy accounting for 55 percent of the country’s industrial production.” It noted, “The weight of Italy in European industrial supply chains far surpasses that of China, and certain countries are especially dependent. In France, textiles and machine tools are the most affected.”

European automakers are among the most exposed to disruptions in European and international supply chains. Volkswagen, Europe’s largest automaker, cited “falling sales and supply chain uncertainty” as the reasons for interrupting production at its plants, while PSA and Renault cited supply disruptions in Spain in their statements reporting their decision to mothball plants.

Workers cannot afford to leave the decision on a return to work in the hands of governments and union bureaucracies whose utter contempt for the lives of the population is an open secret. The resources in the trillion-euro bank bailouts must be impounded and used to finance scientific research, a vast emergency expansion of health care, and full and direct financial support for workers and small businesses impacted by the catastrophe, regardless of nationality or ethnic origins. This requires the unification of the struggles of the working class across Europe on a socialist program.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact