

The COVID-19 pandemic and the class war in Europe

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The following speech was delivered by Alex Lantier, founding member of the Parti de l'égalité socialiste (France) to the 2020 International May Day Online Rally held by the World Socialist Web Site and the International Committee of the Fourth International on May 2.

Dear comrades and friends, I am honored to bring fraternal greetings from the Socialist Equality Party of France to this international gathering.

Barely three months have passed since the first cases of COVID-19 emerged in Europe. But Europe has already suffered a massive and lasting blow. Around 1.5 million cases are confirmed here; hundreds of thousands more are infected, left out of the official statistics, suffering or dying at home or in retirement homes. Over 130,000 Europeans have died, and millions are mourning them.

The confinement policies necessary to contain COVID-19's spread have brought the European economy to a halt. Over 11 million workers in France, 10 million in Germany, and 9 million in Spain are unemployed or underemployed—several times more than after the 2008 crash. The survival of millions of small businesses is under threat. Europe is facing its deepest economic crisis since the Depression of the 1930s, which led to the outbreak of World War II.

This historic crisis has revealed the political rot of European capitalism and of the ruling financial aristocracy. Since 2008, Europe's governments and central banks have poured over four trillion euros of public money into the banks, while imposing devastating austerity to workers and social services.

Since then, social resources have gone not to buy masks or respirators, or to finance key scientific research, but the buy up big investors' toxic debts and to wage war.

What is the result? These mass deaths, which could have been avoided, are the product not only of nature but above all of class society. Now, across Europe, a continent with many of the world's wealthiest countries, masks and other key medical supplies are unobtainable. Medical staff themselves have paid a heavy price: they are 20 percent of the sick in Spain, 10 percent in Italy, or over 60,000 people just in those two countries.

The European Union abandoned the worst-hit countries to themselves: Berlin and Paris refused to export masks and other medical equipment to Italy or to other countries.

As for a coronavirus vaccine, which scientists hoped to work on since the 2002 SARS epidemic, work must start virtually from scratch. "Most projects that we had on the virus were on standby," explained one French scientist, for lack of funding. This decision is now costing not thousands of euros, but thousands of lives.

The European Union and European capitalism are economically, politically and morally bankrupt. The working class now faces a struggle on two fronts: the war against COVID-19, and the class war.

Firstly, the most oppressed layers of workers are on the front lines against the virus. CEOs and professionals are sheltering at home in country estates or big apartments in affluent neighborhoods, but truckers, deliverymen, caregivers and nurses are still at work. These essential but poorly paid workers are exposed to COVID-19, often living cramped together in small apartments, in working class districts classified as "red zones" due to the large number of cases there.

Second, the pandemic is preparing a new eruption of class struggle. Already, it was only mass wildcat strikes by steelworkers, autoworkers, and other factory workers in Italy in early March that forced capitalist

governments to agree to shelter-at-home orders demanded by health authorities.

But the bourgeoisie relentlessly pursues a criminal policy. In Berlin, Chancellor Angela Merkel declared that 60 to 70 percent of the population would catch COVID-19. The British government for its part calls this same sinister theory “herd immunity.”

The European Union is launching a back-to-work campaign, carried out by all the European states, amid a raging pandemic with over 20,000 new cases each day across Europe. This will inevitably lead to an increase in numbers of new cases and of deaths.

At the same time, the European Central Bank and the EU have announced trillions of euros in bank bailouts. To extract profits to be paid on this flood of fictitious capital, vast social attacks are planned on the workers now being forced back to work. The Medef, the French business federation, is demanding historic cuts to overtime and vacation days, while the tens of thousands of layoffs in European airlines and tourism are an initial sign of the jobs massacre now being planned.

The union bureaucracies and petty-bourgeois populist parties like Podemos in Spain are complicit in this criminal policy. In Spain, the Podemos government is even sending police to assault steelworkers striking for the right to shelter at home amid the pandemic.

But the working class is not a herd, and it will not let itself be culled.

Since 2018, working class anger is shaking Europe. France’s “yellow vest” movement; strikes of Portuguese nurses, Polish teachers and German metalworkers; mass protests against political repression in Catalonia; and strikes of British and French rail workers have all marked the birth of a new era of the class struggle. The bankruptcy of European capitalism as it emerged from the Stalinist bureaucracy’s dissolution of the Soviet Union and the formation of the European Union is provoking growing working class opposition.

The pandemic does not lessen but intensifies class conflict. The working class faces the urgent necessity of smashing capitalist opposition to an all-out struggle against the pandemic, that places all social resources to a struggle to defend life.

The only viable strategy for workers is a return to the struggle to transfer state power to the working class, a struggle launched a century ago in the October 1917

revolution in Russia.

Today, on this day of the international working class, the International Committee of the Fourth International greets workers around the world as it undertakes to build among them a socialist movement that can carry out this revolutionary task. Faced with the undeniable bankruptcy of the European Union, it advances the struggle for the United Socialist States of Europe.



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