While coronavirus spreads, lockdowns lifted across Europe

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Governments across Europe lifted confinement measures yesterday, reopening schools and businesses and returning millions of workers across the continent to their workplaces as the deadly coronavirus continued to spread. The end to lockdown is proceeding even as new reports emerge of an uptick in cases in areas where its spread had been brought under control and lockdown restrictions had since been eased.

In France, where roughly 2,800 people remain under ventilation in hospitals and where 70 people died in the last 24 hours, bringing the total number of dead to 26,380, the eight-week lockdown that began on March 17 ended yesterday. Schools reopened for the youngest students, and non-essential businesses resumed, with the hospitality sector restricted to running take-out services.

In Germany, Chancellor Angela Merkel ordered an end to the lockdown last Wednesday, with schools and businesses reopening. Restaurants have already begun dine-in service in the northeastern state of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. Non-essential businesses also opened in Austria, and final-year students had already returned to school last week.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson delivered a national televised address on Sunday evening, calling for construction and manufacturing workers and others who cannot work from home to return to work. Yesterday, data from the UK Office of National Statistics showed that construction and other low-skilled elementary workers were among the most likely to die from the disease, with a mortality rate of 21.4 per 100,000 people as of April 20, along with social caring workers and machine operators.

Johnson also called for schools to prepare to reopen, declaring that all students should be in school for at least one month before summer. The UK's coronavirus official, vastly underestimated death toll grew by another 268 yesterday to 32,065, with almost 4,000 new reported cases.

Belgium, which has the highest per capita death rate from the coronavirus in the world, with more than 53,000 confirmed cases and 8,707 deaths out of a population of just over 11 million people, reopened schools and stores yesterday. In Italy, where statistical analysis of the national mortality rate indicates that the real coronavirus death toll is more than 50,000, all non-essential businesses have been reopened since last Monday.

In Spain, people living in many areas of the country have been allowed to go to restaurants, visit family members and attend gatherings of up to 10 people since yesterday. The Socialist Party and pseudo-left Podemos government is implementing an end to confinement even as the country's military predicts that its policies will lead to a second wave of the virus in the country where it has already killed 26,744 people.

In Denmark, secondary schools are due to open next week, while shopping centres opened yesterday. In Norway, all classes resumed today after classes had already been opened for those aged 6–10. Schools will reopen on May 14 in Finland. Final-year school students already returned last week in the Netherlands. All stores opened in Greece yesterday.

The mass return to work underway across Europe is in line with the criminal policy being pursued by the Trump administration in the United States. It is being carried out hand-in-glove with the trade unions in every country, who are enforcing the return to work and suppressing any struggle by workers against the deconfinement.

The European ruling class, like its American counterparts, is not seeking to carry out a struggle

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against the spread of the coronavirus. Its policies are driven by the requirement to force workers back into their workplace, regardless of the risk to their lives and those of their loved ones, to continue pumping out profits.

The reopening of classrooms, exposing children, teachers and their families to the disease, underscores the criminality of this policy. Children are being sent to school so that their parents can be freed to work, while scientists continue to issue warnings that schools function as propagation vectors for virus transmission and that children may develop a rare and potentially fatal syndrome, Kawasaki Disease, as a result of the coronavirus.

Even as the return to work is underway, evidence is already emerging that it is leading to a renewed uptick in cases. In Germany, where a systematic campaign has been underway in the media and by the political establishment to minimise the danger of the virus, the Robert Koch Institute reported yesterday that the virus reproduction rate had increased above unity, indicating exponential spread.

In France, two new clusters were detected over the weekend, in Dordogne and Vienne. The cluster in Vienne, in central France, occurred at a school because the teachers had had to come into the building to make preparations for the return of students. The French education minister Olivier Blanquer nonetheless declared in an interview with the *Journal de Dimanche* the same day that every child in France should be in school at least one day this month.

The criminal character of the ruling class' policy is epitomized by the Macron administration. For weeks, it declared that it would only order an end to confinement once it had sufficient capacity to conduct mass testing and contact tracing to contain the spread of the virus. It estimated this would mean at least 700,000 tests per week, which it declared would be ready by the time deconfinement was ordered. The director of health Jérôme Salomon had included daily test numbers as part of the government's briefing.

As the deconfinement deadline approached, this promise was quietly dropped. While the government provides no central tally of the number of tests in the country, an analysis published by the investigative wing of *Radio France* published yesterday, which tabulated various local sources, concluded that approximately 149,000 tests were conducted in the week from April 27 to May 3, less than a quarter of the government's supposed required threshold for a deconfinement.

In other words, the deconfinement had nothing to do with satisfying the conditions for a preconceived scientific plan for the combating the virus, but was determined by the government's economic policy, with a suitable lying pretext invented, and then dropped when even this façade could not be maintained.

From the outset of the pandemic, the European ruling class, like its counterparts internationally, has responded to the pandemic not as a healthcare emergency, but as a market event. It has been engaged not in a fight to save lives, but to protect corporate profits.

While national governments have initiated multi-hundred-billion-euro bailout packages for large corporations, the European Central Bank voted in March to carry out a 750 billion euro asset-purchasing program throughout 2020, buying bonds from both corporations and national governments in order to prop up share markets. The asset purchases have since been raised to 1.1 trillion euros. While the corporate and financial elite has been protected from any losses to their wealth, hundreds of billions of euros in worthless assets are being transferred directly from the books of corporations and banks on to the ledgers of central banks, for which the ruling class will seek to make the working class pay through brutal austerity against its jobs and living conditions.

The lifting of lockdowns across Europe signifies that the ruling class is carrying out policies that will, and that it knows will, lead to the deaths of tens or even hundreds of thousands of people.

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