

As hundreds across Europe die daily from coronavirus

European Union pushes reopening of beach resorts and hotels for summer holiday season

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One of the most grotesque aspects of the criminally irresponsible drive by governments across Europe to roll back all measures enacted to slow the spread of the coronavirus is the push by the European Union (EU) and national governments to restart the tourist sector.

Even as hundreds of Europeans continue to die every day from the highly contagious virus, for which no treatment is yet available, leading politicians are urging their populations to get ready to jet off to beach resorts and packed hotels in southern Europe with airlines who are refusing to adopt even the most basic social distancing measures.

The reviving of the tourist industry amid the pandemic is a key part of the reckless drive to reopen the economy. In Germany and France, schools have been reopened despite warnings from scientists that they will accelerate the spread of the virus and an immediate outbreak of COVID-19 forcing fresh closures. Virtually all limited restrictions on industry, retail, and even cultural and leisure activities have been or are being lifted. Millions of workers are being forced back to unsafe workplaces, where they risk infecting themselves and their loved ones.

The starting gun for the tourist sector was fired by the EU Commission, which last week presented a document, “Commission’s guidance on how to safely resume travel and reboot Europe’s tourism in 2020 and beyond.” Given that the document contained a series of irresponsible measures to abandon even limited restrictions on movement under conditions in which the virus is by no means under control, the references to “safety” and observing “health precautions” were for public consumption alone.

Piling one lie on another, the Commission claimed its guidelines would restore “transport services across the EU while protecting the health of transport workers and passengers.” They would also “allow people to safely stay at hotels, camping sites, Bed & Breakfasts or other holiday accommodation establishments, eat and drink at restaurants, bars and cafés and go to beaches and other leisure outdoor areas.”

The public justification for such sweeping proposals, which from a medical and public health standpoint are criminal, is that the jobs of 37 million people employed in the tourist industry across Europe need to be protected. EU Internal Market Commissioner Thierry Breton declared, “Millions of SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises) and family-run businesses working in accommodation, restaurants, passenger transport and travel agencies risk bankruptcies and job losses—they urgently need to go back to work.”

Such posturing is cynical and dishonest. The EU and its member states have spent the past weeks funnelling trillions of euros into the

coffers of the major banks and corporations, which have been aimed at guaranteeing the wealth of the super-rich and facilitating a comprehensive restructuring of wide swathes of the economy at the expense of the working class.

Governments across the continent have given tens of billions of euros to the major air travel and tourism companies while doing next to nothing to support workers and small business operators. In fact, the major bailouts have been bound-up with a jobs massacre in the travel and tourism sectors to ensure the profitability of the major corporations and guarantee returns for shareholders. They have been aimed at strengthening national flagship carriers, which remain important assets for advancing the predatory interests of each country’s ruling elite, under conditions of mounting international conflicts and trade war tensions. Some of the largest bailouts include:

- Lufthansa is likely to receive up to €9 billion from Germany’s federal government. The airline has already announced the destruction of up to 18,000 jobs.

- TUI, the largest travel company in the world, received a state-backed loan of €1.8 billion from Germany’s Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (KfW). A few weeks later, the company announced 8,000 job cuts.

- Air France/KLM is receiving €9 billion in support from the French and Dutch governments. The airline group has called a strategic workforce planning meeting with trade unions for June to discuss job cuts that could be as high as 2,000.

- International Airline Group, which owns British Airways and Iberia, has received €1 billion from the Spanish government. British Airways is cutting 12,000 jobs.

- Scandinavian Airlines is to receive a credit line worth more than €300 million guaranteed by the Swedish and Danish governments. It has announced 4,900 staff layoffs.

Having organised a multi-billion euro transfer of public money into the coffers of the major corporations, Europe’s governments now want to risk the lives of airline workers, caterers, hotel workers, transport providers, and tourists themselves to boost corporate

profitability in an economic sector that accounts for 10 percent of the EU's GDP. If hundreds of thousands are infected and tens of thousands die in the process, so be it!

Greece announced this week that it will reopen its islands to tourists as of July 1, with hotels opening their doors two weeks earlier to domestic visitors. The implications were made clear by Gkikas Magiorkinis, an assistant professor of hygiene and epidemiology who sits on the body of public health experts that advises the Greek government on COVID-19. "If nine million tourists come and just 1 percent falls ill that means 90,000 new cases," he told the *Guardian*.

Safeguarding workers' jobs in the tourist industry and the livelihoods of small business owners is only possible by recognising the fact that the travel and tourism sector cannot safely operate during a pandemic caused by a disease for which no treatment is yet available. Tens of billions of euros should be allocated to pay full wages to everyone prevented from working by the medically necessary coronavirus regulations, including operating costs for small, family-run businesses.

Society has more than enough financial resources to do this. The European Central Bank's first tranche of stimulus funding for the big banks and financial markets of €750 billion announced in March would suffice to provide every one of Europe's 37 million employees in the tourist sector with more than €20,000 of assistance.

Moreover, it is obvious that the 37 million workers in the tourist industry, who are spread across every corner of Europe, require an international solution to the economic and social crisis they confront. In contrast to the ruling elite's obsession with defending their "own" airlines as profit-making concerns, workers in the tourism sector should unite across all national borders and fight for the safety and lives of workers and tourists alike to be placed ahead of private profit.

Instead, the policy being pursued will inevitably trigger a catastrophic second wave of the pandemic across Europe. Tourists from every corner of the continent will be herded at close quarters through airports onto tightly packed aircraft. The airlines have already made clear that social distancing is a non-starter, given the impact on their bottom lines. Airlines for Europe, representing the main carriers, wrote to the EU Commission demanding that any regulations be kept "proportionate." "Social distancing is neither necessary nor viable on board an aircraft," asserted Thomas Reynaert, the managing director of industry association Airlines for Europe.

Ryanair, Europe's largest budget airline, threatened to ground its entire fleet if the EU enforced a token measure to force airlines to keep the middle seat in each row free of passengers. Unsurprisingly, the proposal was dropped and replaced by non-binding "recommendations."

One report noted that if strict social distancing were being enforced on planes, each passenger would require seven seats.

The contempt being displayed for workers and their families was underscored Monday when German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas organised a video conference with 10 foreign ministers from countries with large summer tourist industries. On a day that saw 16,760 new infections and 780 deaths across the continent, Maas blustered that Germany's worldwide travel warning would be lifted on June 14 and replaced by travel advisories so that "each customer can decide where they can travel, what they can expect there, and where they should perhaps avoid travelling to this summer." A second conference followed Wednesday between Germany and its nine neighbouring states to push ahead with plans to relax travel restrictions for tourists.

Germany's approach is part of the EU's push to remove all blanket

travel restrictions for cross-border traffic and abolish 14-day quarantines for new arrivals. In the lead-up to Monday's conference, Spanish officials pointed out that it would be difficult to explain to the population why the borders were being opened for tourists when portions of the country's residents remain under lockdown. However, this did not stop regional governments in the Balearic and Canary Islands from announcing pilot projects to welcome German tourists as early as late June. Berlin is organising the project in consultation with TUI.

Maas and others have repeatedly claimed that they do not want to trigger a "race" to attract tourists. But this is precisely what their policies are doing, and they know it. With Athens to begin flying in guests from countries with low infection rates via so-called "air bridges" July 1, Italy said it will open its borders to tourists on June 3.

These reckless policies are being implemented as the pandemic continues to rage across the continent. There are still more than 850,000 active COVID-19 cases in Europe, including over 223,000 in Russia, 55,000 in Spain, 60,000 in Italy, 89,000 in France, and 11,800 in Germany.

The mass media has taken up the challenge of encouraging a largely sceptical and even hostile population to risk their lives. "Summer holiday: What is possible where?" asked a report featured prominently by broadcaster ARD's *Tagesschau*, while the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* enthused, "Holiday in the Mediterranean is getting closer."

Leading medical experts are already sounding the alarm. Hans Kluge, the Europe director of the World Health Organisation, stressed that authorities should spend more time focusing on preparations for the second wave of infections that will be produced by the lifting of lockdowns. Now is the time for "preparation, not celebration," Kluge told Britain's *Daily Telegraph*.

Frank Ulrich Montgomery, president of the World Medical Association, sharply criticised the role of the German government. Calling for border controls to remain in place, he stated, "The government is acting here exclusively for business reasons, and is underestimating the health risks. We can't go back to normality yet." He added that a second, more deadly wave of infections would likely be triggered.

These warnings carry even more weight given that a refusal to impose restrictions on the lucrative tourist industry played a substantial role in spreading the virus across Europe in February and March. Several ski resorts in Austria and Italy emerged as hotspots for infections, with visitors carrying the virus to all parts of Europe and the world. In Ischgl, a tourist resort in the Austrian state of Tyrol, tourist firms kept operations running for eight days after initial reports of a coronavirus case emerged. According to the Consumer Protection Association in Vienna, customers from 45 countries have signed up for a class lawsuit after they were infected following travel to Ischgl. Twenty-five people who were infected there are known to have died.



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