

Spain imposes regional lockdowns amid resurgence of COVID-19

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Several regions in Spain have re-imposed partial lockdown measures as coronavirus cases begin to rise once again.

Since 21 June, when the Podemos-Socialist Party (PSOE) government declared the end of measures to tackle the virus and the start of the “new normal”, there have been over 100 coronavirus outbreaks, of which 73 are still active, according to Health Minister Salvador Illa. An “outbreak” is defined as a cluster of three or more linked cases in a single area.

As of yesterday, 28,401 people are confirmed to have died from coronavirus in Spain with 253,056 confirmed infections, including five new deaths and 241 new cases in the last 24 hours. This itself is an undercount of the deaths caused by COVID-19, as excess deaths between March and May alone during the pandemic were over 48,000.

Segrià, a county in the west of Catalonia, which encompasses the city of Lleida and has a population of around 200,000 people, re-imposed limited lockdown measures on Saturday, after a surge of cases was reported. On Monday, health officials for Lleida province revealed that contagion rates in Segrià were 20 times that of Catalonia as a whole.

Over 500 new cases of coronavirus were detected in Segrià in the week preceding the imposition of lockdown measures, up from 208 cases the previous week.

Residents of Segrià will not be able to leave the county for two weeks and no one from outside the region will be allowed to enter—with the exception of those who need to for work. No restrictions have been placed on businesses, which continue to operate as normal, forcing their employees to travel to workplaces and work in often unsafe conditions. Wearing a face mask was made compulsory in Catalonia in all public places from yesterday.

Those who break the renewed confinement measures will be fined, with lockdown rules enforced by 200 members of the Catalan police, the Mossos d'Esquadra, at 25 checkpoints across Segrià.

The outbreak has been linked to temporary harvest workers in the area, with 11 of the 15 clusters reported in Segrià associated with fruit-picking companies. The

increased economic activity in the area since the Podemos-PSOE government's “back-to-work” orders, along with the arrival of thousands of temporary workers, saw the accumulated incidence of COVID-19 in Segrià rise to more than 175 cases per 100,000 inhabitants.

Around 30,000 temporary workers arrive in the region during the fruit-harvesting season, including many undocumented migrant workers labouring in appalling conditions for minimal pay, and often without proper accommodation.

Fernando García Benavides, professor of Public Health at the University of Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona and former president of the Spanish Society of Epidemiology, explained that the horrendous conditions facing migrant workers in fruit-picking and packing companies provide a perfect breeding ground for the spread of coronavirus.

“It is inside [these] companies that there is the riskiest contact,” he said. “The virus is spreading; these are young people who aren't getting ill from the virus and are passing on the infection. The working environment for these people, if you can call it that, is especially precarious; they work in the fields, in warehouses packaging the fruit and they live on the streets.”

United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, Philip Alston, who visited Spain in January and February this year, described conditions in camps for temporary fruit-picking workers as “worse than [in] a refugee camp, without water or electricity. The word that is most often heard is ‘abandonment’.”

In May, there was a massive outpouring of public anger after photos and videos emerged of around 200 temporary migrant workers, who had travelled to Lleida to find fruit-harvesting work, sleeping rough in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions in the streets of the historic centre of the city. With local authorities doing nothing to house the workers, Monacan footballer Keita Baldé—who is of Senegalese heritage like many of the migrant fruit-pickers—paid for hotels in the city to provide accommodation for the migrant workers.

On 3 July, the Catalan regional government set up a temporary field hospital in Lleida to assist permanent hospitals with a possible influx of coronavirus patients. Eighty-two people remain hospitalised with coronavirus in Lleida, of whom 11 are currently in Intensive Care Units. Regional authorities in Catalonia have reportedly also begun drafting volunteers from the public health care system to work at the temporary hospital.

While coronavirus cases are rising, the Podemos-PSOE government is rejecting a coordinated response, leaving regional authorities to manage and control local coronavirus outbreaks since Spain finally ended confinement measures on June 21. Despite the presence in government of Podemos, a “left populist” party linked to the Syriza party in Greece and Bernie Sanders in the United States, Madrid is in the final analysis pursuing the same policy as Washington and the other major European capitals.

Forced to impose a lockdown in March by a pan-European wave of strikes, Madrid is pushing workers back to work to produce profits for the financial aristocracy. The €1.35 trillion European Central Bank (ECB) bailout and state bailout packages are going overwhelmingly to pay off the banks and finance mass sackings and corporate restructuring. The PSOE, Podemos and affiliated unions are determined that deconfinement and European Union (EU) austerity will continue and that no measure is taken against COVID-19 that would interfere with corporate profits.

“We have taken necessary, adequate and valiant measures, we must see if they have an impact,” Illa said. Stressing that “there will continue to be outbreaks” and demanding that Spaniards “learn to live with the virus until there is a vaccine or a treatment,” he ruled out any return to a nationwide lockdown: “Currently there are no plans to adopt such a measure.”

COVID-19 is continuing to spread rapidly in regions across Spain, however. On 5 July, the county of A Mariña, in the north-western region of Galicia, was also forced to impose renewed confinement measures. Residents and other individuals will be prohibited from entering or leaving the area, which has a population of 71,000, until Saturday, the day before Galicia is set to hold regional elections.

The outbreak in A Mariña is centred on restaurants and bars in the municipalities of Burela and Xove, with around half a dozen venues having to close for two weeks after members of their staff tested positive for COVID-19.

As of Thursday, there were 165 active coronavirus cases in A Mariña, an increase of 21 cases on the previous day. The region of Galicia was the first to enter the “new normal” in Spain, lifting all restrictions on 15 June.

In the northern region of Aragón, bordering Catalonia, four counties — Cinca Medio, Bajo Cinca, La Litera and

Caspe—were returned to “Phase 2” of the government’s deconfinement plan at the end of June, after COVID-19 outbreaks were detected in slaughterhouses and fruit and vegetable companies. “Phase 2” indicates that shops and indoor restaurants will be limited to 40 percent of their capacity, while wedding venues and places of worship must not be more than half full.

Residents in the four counties are advised to limit their movement and to maintain physical-distancing and hygiene measures, meeting in groups of no more than 15.

Two apartment blocks—one in Albacete in the central region of Castilla–La Mancha and one in Santander in the northern region of Cantabria—were also quarantined after outbreaks of coronavirus were detected. In Santander, around 80 people were isolated in their apartment block for 13 days after a cluster of 16 cases was found. In Albacete, around 20 people remain confined to their building after two outbreaks involving nine people were detected.

Quarantine measures at the two apartment blocks were enforced by national police.

The surge in cases is an indictment of the Podemos-PSOE government’s “new normal” policy, which has seen workers forced back to factories, offices and other workplaces without basic health and safety measures to protect them from the coronavirus. The new outbreaks are a direct result of this reopening agenda. Restaurants, bars, food-production companies, and other workplaces where physical-distancing measures are impossible are emerging as the centres of infection.

The average age of coronavirus patients has fallen by around 10 years in the last weeks, to 47 for men and 50 for women, as younger, working-age people are infected.

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), workers in Spain are among the most at risk of catching the virus. Nearly six in 10 (56 percent) workers carry out roles which put them at greater risk of infection in the workplace, the highest figure of the 24 countries analysed by the OECD. The average proportion of at-risk workers is 48 percent, the OECD said.

A recent seroprevalence study in Spain found that only about five percent of the population had COVID-19 antibodies. Thus, infections could spread rapidly through a population with little immunity now that preventive measures have been largely abandoned.



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