

COVID-19 spread accelerates across Europe as EU summit opens

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As European Union (EU) heads of state began meeting Friday in Brussels to discuss a bailout package, as part of a two-day summit, the COVID-19 pandemic was accelerating across the continent. Back-to-work policies launched by governments and trade unions across Europe since lockdowns ended in May are leading to a collapse of social distancing, and a new contagion threatening once again to swamp health systems.

In Spain—where 1,361 new cases were discovered on July 16, the first time since May that the total was over 1,000—municipal authorities in Barcelona asked residents of the metropolitan area of 5 million people to stay inside yesterday. Of these new Spanish cases, 647 were in Catalonia. Regional counselor Meritxell Budó said this was “the last chance to avoid having to go to measures confining the entire population.”

Germany had 583 new infections and Austria 157 on Thursday, the highest number in the latter country since April 10. In Belgium, COVID-19 infections have risen 32 percent to an average of 115 daily. The reproduction rate of the virus has passed above 1 in Germany as well as in Belgium, indicating that the number of new cases is beginning to grow exponentially again. “Given these data,” said Belgian virologist Marc Van Ranst, “we must say that we are seeing the beginning of a second wave.”

In France, where there are 184 active clusters and confirmed community spread, the reproduction rate has surged to 2.62 in Brittany, 1.5 in the Loire Valley, and 1.55 in the Riviera. It is over 1 in a number of regions, including the Paris area.

Nonetheless, the focus of the officials gathering in Brussels for their first physical meeting since the COVID-19 pandemic’s onset in Europe was not stopping the contagion. Rather, they were clashing over how to organize trillion-euro corporate and bank bailouts while imposing austerity and mass layoffs destroying millions of jobs across Europe. The European bourgeoisie is not waging war on COVID-19, but on the working class.

While the European Central Bank (ECB) has printed €1.25

trillion [\$US1.43 trillion] given to European banks, the EU is preparing a €750 billion bailout planned by Berlin and Paris. Already, EU states have lavished tens of billions on corporate bailouts for Siemens, Airbus, Renault and various national airlines. At the same time, governments, corporations and trade unions are shamelessly approving mass sackings carried out by powerful corporations enriched by bailouts using public funds.

Bitter divisions persist in the EU over how to guarantee that bailouts will serve to impose draconian austerity, as in Greece after the 2008 Wall Street crash, and boost EU firms’ global competitiveness. Arriving in Brussels, Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany, whose government holds the rotating EU presidency, said: “The differences are still very large and so I can’t predict that we will achieve a result this time. It would be desirable, but we also have to be realistic.”

On the first day of talks, several smaller countries opposed the Franco-German bailout. Hungarian premier Viktor Orban threatened to veto a provision requiring states to respect the EU’s “fundamental values” to receive bailout funds, and Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte demanded the right to veto all spending of EU bailout funds.

Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte hailed the bailout proposed by Berlin and Paris, where austerity would not be mandated by EU talks as in Greece, but worked out in behind-the-scenes negotiations among major EU powers. “We are elaborating a response, an economic and social response, to all our European citizens in the common interest of the values that we share,” Conte claimed.

In reality, the EU is responding to world capitalism’s greatest economic downturn since the 1930s by aggressively asserting its imperialist interests. This strategy, carried out at the expense of the working class at home, relies critically on the support of the union bureaucracies to try to suppress explosive social opposition.

Yesterday, the French unions met with newly installed Prime Minister Jean Castex to plan economic policy. They agreed to wait until the end of the year to implement major

cuts to pensions they negotiated earlier this year with President Emmanuel Macron, while Castex works on formulating corporate restructuring and mass layoffs at workplaces across France. Nonetheless, union officials of all colorations hailed Castex and his reactionary plans as they left his offices.

Philippe Martinez of the CGT (General Confederation of Labor) said: “We are in midstream, but what is done cannot be undone. Discontent, protests, he has to take them into account. That is a good thing.” This is a fraud. In reality, the EU is planning massive attacks and timing them carefully in discussions with the unions to avoid provoking a social explosion.

What holds the EU together is not so much common interests, as desperate attempts to confront the European working class at home and great power rivals abroad—not only traditional opponents of NATO like Russia, but increasingly the EU’s NATO “ally,” the United States.

At the summit, the EU powers are seeking to take a further step in transforming the EU into a military alliance. At a meeting in Warsaw, German Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer and her Polish counterpart Mariusz Blaszczyk pleaded for more EU military spending. In the current compromise proposal from EU Council President Charles Michel, €7 billion are earmarked for the EU defence fund, which promotes joint armament projects, and a further €1.5 billion for adapting the European transport network to military requirements.

Underlying this policy is the deepest economic crisis since the end of the Second World War and growing inter-imperialist tensions, especially between Germany and the United States.

On Wednesday, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo issued new threats to intensify sanctions against companies building the Nord Stream 2 pipeline linking Russia and Germany. The sanctions prepared under the American CAATSA (Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act) law—which was previously used against Iran, North Korea and Russia—are aimed at companies from at least five European countries.

Germany’s Wintershall and Uniper, Royal Dutch Shell, France’s ENGIE and Austria’s OMV have all been involved in financing the construction of Nordstream 2.

On Thursday German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas denounced US plans in unusually strong terms. “With its announcements on measures that also threaten European companies with sanctions, the US Administration is disrespecting Europe’s right and sovereignty to decide itself where and how we source our energy,” he said in a German foreign ministry statement. “European energy policy is decided in Europe and not in Washington. We firmly reject

extraterritorial sanctions.”

Another event pointing to the very tense transatlantic relationship is Thursday’s ruling by the EU Court of Justice throwing out a central EU-US data flows agreement, the so-called Privacy Shield. The official presentation of the ruling as a defence of European citizens’ democratic rights against US spy services is a fraud. European intelligence services, like their American counterparts, routinely engage in mass spying on the population.

Rather, after the EU closed its borders to American citizens, citing the disastrous US handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU is responding to the pandemic by moving against its nominal “ally.”

There are ever more aggressive calls to re-militarize not only German but EU foreign policy. In an interview with German weekly *Die Zeit* published on Thursday, Kramp-Karrenbauer called for massively rearming the EU to defend its imperialist interests internationally, including against nuclear powers:

“We need a 360-degree view,” she stressed. “If you look at who is within range of Russian missiles in Europe, it is just the Central and Eastern European states and us [Germany]. That is one of the reasons why many of these states see us as an important partner to lean on, with their interests in mind. We will work on a joint threat analysis during our EU Presidency. For we must develop defence systems. Take air defence: This is increasingly about drones, AI-controlled drone swarms or hypersonic weapons.”

Whichever factions win out in the bitter debate over bailout policy, it is clear that the plans for a dramatic rearmament and corporate restructuring of the EU entail serious attacks on workers.



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