

Corporate profits before lives: Europe's reopening policies endanger millions of lives

Johannes Stern
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Six months after the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the coronavirus to be a global health emergency on 31 January, the situation is out of control. More than 17.2 million people have been infected by the virus worldwide, while over 670,000 have died.

Hundreds of people are dying every day in the countries with the highest number of new cases, including the United States, Brazil, India, Colombia and Mexico. According to Johns Hopkins University, 1,592 deaths were registered in the United States on Tuesday alone. This was the highest number in the past two-and-a-half months. Brazil set an all-time record on Wednesday with 69,074 new infections and 1,595 deaths. The total number of registered corona deaths in that country is now more than 90,000.

In Europe, one of the first epicentres of the pandemic, the virus is spreading at a dangerous pace. "We are in the midst of a rapidly escalating pandemic," warned the president of Germany's Robert Koch Institute (RKI), Lothar Wieler, at a press conference on Tuesday. Over the preceding seven days, 3,611 new infections in Germany were reported to his institute, which is Germany's official public health agency. The reproduction rate, or "R" rate, is currently 1.25, meaning that the virus is spreading exponentially. Yesterday the RKI reported 902 new infections. This is the biggest increase since May.

Other countries are also seeing a dramatic rise in new infections. "It could be the case that we are already in a second wave," said Maria Jose Sierra, spokesperson for Spain's agency for health care emergencies (CCAES). Since mid-July, the number of new infections in Spain has trebled. The hardest hit region is Catalonia. Over the past week alone, 4,846 cases were registered there. A series of local outbreaks have occurred in Madrid, resulting in a total of 1,200 new infections over the past week.

Other countries in southern and western Europe are also recording increases. In France, new infections have risen for the third week in a row, while the number of COVID-19 patients in Austria's hospitals has risen to more than 100 for the first time since May. Over the past seven days, Belgium recorded an average of 311 cases per day, with the figure still rising. As in Spain, the Belgian government felt compelled earlier in the week to reintroduce limited restrictions on public life.

Developments in Eastern Europe are especially dramatic. Russia is recording close to 6,000 cases daily, while both Ukraine and Romania are registering around 1,000 infections per day. On Wednesday, Poland reported 512 new infections, with outbreaks at three coal mines in Silesia, several businesses, and an elderly care home in the southern district of Malopolska. The number of new infections has steadily increased since 17 July.

Many of those infected in Eastern Europe are workers being exploited under conditions akin to slave labour. At a farm in Maming, Bavaria, 174 infections among migrant workers were recorded a few days ago, and hundreds more have been infected at slaughterhouses across Germany and the Netherlands.

As in the United States, the European ruling classes bear full responsibility for the coronavirus catastrophe. The resurgence of the virus is the direct product of their reckless and premature policy of reopening the economy, which was aimed at sending workers back to their jobs as soon as possible, reopening schools and childcare facilities, and reviving tourism. After the lockdowns and social distancing measures produced an initial decline in cases, they have created a situation similar to that earlier this year, when health care systems in Italy and Spain collapsed and tens of thousands died under terrible conditions.

Even though the pandemic now threatens thousands of additional lives, the European governments have agreed that there will be no serious or coordinated measures to contain the disease.

"We will not impose a lockdown like last March, because we have learned that the economic and human costs of a total lockdown are catastrophic," stated French Prime Minister Jean Castex in an 8 July television interview. He thus summed up the view of the entire European ruling class, which is prepared to sacrifice millions of human lives to protect corporate profits.

According to a study by researchers from Imperial College London, the lockdowns in Europe prevented the deaths of 3 million people. "We find that, across 11 countries, since the beginning of the epidemic, 3,100,000 [2,800,000- 3,500,000] deaths have been averted..." wrote the researchers. This included 690,000 lives in France, 630,000 in Italy, 560,000 in Germany, 470,000 in Britain, 450,000 in Spain, 110,000 in Belgium, and tens of thousands in all of the other five countries investigated.

The financial elite is now openly stating that it would have been better if these people had died. The lockdown was "from an economic standpoint not worth" the lives saved, stated a study released Wednesday by former Bank of England economist David Miles. A perverse calculation model, which converted each human life into a value in British pounds, allegedly proved that the "years of lifetime saved" were worth less than the debt accumulated by the British state. On this basis, Miles and his banker colleagues demand that all "comprehensive measures" to combat the pandemic be ended.

This strategy of "herd immunity," which in reality amounts to a policy of mass murder, was the policy pursued by the European ruling elite from the outset. With breathtaking indifference to the fate of millions of people, German Chancellor Angela Merkel bluntly

declared at a March 11 press conference that the German government expected between 60 and 70 percent of the population to get infected by coronavirus.

The WSWS wrote at the time, “What such statements reveal is not incompetence, but political criminality. Seventy-five years after the downfall of the Nazi Third Reich, a fascistic attitude towards the working class prevails in the financial aristocracy, mirroring that of Ancient Rome to its galley slaves: work until you die.” We continued, “No doubt, significant sections of the ruling class consider the coronavirus to be a gift from God. The deaths of millions of the old and sick would allow new cuts to social spending, flushing billions more into their pockets.” (See: On coronavirus, Merkel tells Europe: “Drop dead!”)

This is precisely what happened. After the horrifying pictures from northern Italy spread around the world, Europe’s governments felt compelled, under pressure from the public and mass strikes, to order measures to enforce social distancing and lockdowns. But these measures were then exploited to organise the largest transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top of society in history. So-called coronavirus emergency bailouts were used to transfer trillions of euros to the banks, major corporations and super-rich virtually overnight.

As soon as the transfer of funds was complete, an essentially fascistic campaign to restart the economy was unleashed. Politicians and media outlets orchestrated a “discussion” about how many lives should be sacrificed to the interests of big business and corporate profit.

In Germany, the back-to-work campaign was spearheaded by federal parliament president Wolfgang Schäuble (Christian Democrats), who made the outrageous claim that human dignity does not include the right to life and is thus not “absolutely” guaranteed by Germany’s Basic Law. All parties represented in parliament then backed right-wing extremist demonstrations, which, in contrast to the vast majority of the population, demanded an end to all restrictions and the abandonment of social distancing measures.

The reactionary goals pursued by the ruling elite with its back-to-work policy are plain for all to see. First and foremost, they want to squeeze the massive sums of money handed over to the financial oligarchy out of the working class. A second important factor is the efforts of German and European imperialism to secure a favourable position in the intensifying rivalries between the major powers. “Additionally, there are geostrategic interests,” noted an article in *Der Spiegel* in April in “the restart of the auto industry.” The article observed, “The company heads want to strengthen the European market to act as a counterweight to the economic power of China and the United States.”

The WSWS has characterised the pandemic as a “trigger event,” which dramatically accelerated the already far advanced social, economic, and geopolitical crises of world capitalism.

The same applies to their policy of war. The US has not only accused China of being responsible for the pandemic, but is also making ever more aggressive preparations for military conflict with that country, one of the world’s largest nuclear-armed powers. The European powers are also exploiting the crisis to press ahead with their rearmament plans. In late May, the German, French, Italian, and Spanish governments addressed a joint letter to Josep Borrell, the European Union’s high representative for foreign and security policy, in which they advocated a vast strengthening of EU military capabilities in response to the pandemic.

While the European powers are united in all fundamentals on the

issues of austerity, militarism and war, they are utterly incapable of developing a joint strategy to combat the pandemic. As the virus began spreading rapidly in early March, the German government imposed an export ban on protective medical equipment. At the last EU summit, the European powers agreed on filling the coffers of the banks and major corporations with another €750 billion; they cut the budget of EU for Health to a pathetic €1.67 billion.

Opposition to these criminal policies among workers and young people is on the rise around the globe. In the United States, Trump has mobilised fascist paramilitary units against peaceful demonstrators because he fears a powerful movement of the working class against his policies of back-to-work and war, which the Democrats fully support. Workers have begun organising themselves in independent rank-and-file committees to oppose the miserable working conditions imposed upon them by corporate management and the trade unions.

Anger is also brewing in Europe. The same major corporations that have been handed tens of billions of public money—including automakers and airlines—are seizing the opportunity to collaborate with the trade unions to enforce plans long held in reserve for sweeping wage cuts and mass layoffs. Earlier this week, thousands of retail workers in France went on strike to protest attacks on their bonuses and wages. Strong opposition exists among teachers and students to a return to “normal conditions” in schools.

Last month, hundreds of thousands demonstrated across Europe as mass protests triggered by the murder of George Floyd in the US spread around the world. The protests not only expressed widespread anger over the actions of the police, but deep-seated opposition to the reactionary policies of the ruling class. These policies are backed by pseudo-left parties like Podemos in Spain, Unsubmissive France, Syriza in Greece, and Germany’s Left Party, who all support their own governments’ drive to reopen the economy, prepare for war, and strengthen the repressive state apparatus.

The International Committee of the Fourth International and its European sections are fighting to arm the mounting opposition of workers and young people with a socialist and internationalist programme. The threat posed to the lives of millions by the pandemic and wars can be prevented only by an independent political movement of the working class against capitalism and for workers’ governments. The wealth of the super-rich, major banks, and large corporations must be expropriated and society must be reorganised along rational, scientific lines to meet the needs of the vast majority. It is high time to take up this struggle. Contact us today to join the Socialist Equality Party.



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