

European countries force children back to school amid resurgence of COVID-19

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22 August 2020

The drive to reopen schools after the summer break continues unabated throughout Europe as the resurgence of the COVID-19 pandemic accelerates across the continent.

Nineteen European countries have crossed a key threshold of cumulative 14-day infection totals higher than 20 per 100,000 inhabitants, considered an early alarm level by many health experts, according to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. Luxembourg and Spain have reported more than 100 new cases per 100,000 people, followed by Malta recording more than 80, Belgium more than 60, and France and the Netherlands more than 40. The UK has 20.7.

Spain continues to be the epicentre of the resurgence of the virus in Europe. There are more than 1,000 outbreaks of the virus currently active. Over 3,650 more infections the previous day were reported on Friday, while weekly deaths have also risen to 125 people. The death toll in Spain remains one of the highest in Europe, with at least 44,868 victims.

The Spanish ruling class did not use the time garnered by the lockdowns imposed in late March and April to prepare for the expected resurgence of the virus. Twelve-thousand tracers are lacking, hospitals are on the verge of collapse in parts of the country due to lack of medical staff, and nursing homes are registering a significant number of increases, after around 20,000 deaths among the elderly were attributed to COVID-19 between March and May. Even data collection has become an issue.

Day after day, the figures being supplied by the ministry are lower than those offered by the press offices of the country's regions.

In Germany, the virus is now soaring. The country widely promoted as a model for containing the virus in

Europe after implementing an early and aggressive test-and-trace policy reported 1,707 new coronavirus cases in the last 24 hours, the highest single-day increase since April. The national number of infected has risen to 228,261 cases of the virus, with 9,253 related deaths, according to data compiled from the Robert Koch Institute for infectious diseases.

France reported 4,771 new infections, with the daily tally going above 3,000 for the fourth time in the last five days. The health ministry said in a statement: "All the indicators keep going up and the transmission of the virus is getting stronger among all ages groups affected, young adults in particular."

In Italy, the virus is once again rising rapidly. Last week, Rome registered 629 new cases in 24 hours, up from 500 on the previous two days. Such numbers had not been seen since May, when Italy was the epicentre of the virus in Europe. Yesterday, another 845 people tested positive.

Even though this spring clearly showed the deadly toll of the virus, European governments all agree that there should be no more lockdowns to halt its spread. Instead, they insist that schools must reopen everywhere—even though school reopenings have accelerated the spread of the virus in areas across North and South America—so workers can fully return to work and the extraction of profits can continue. If lives are lost, then so be it: COVID-19 is, as one American doctor put it, a "poor person's virus."

In an interview with *Paris Match* magazine, President Emmanuel Macron declared that French people will have to endure the virus: "We can't shut the country down because the collateral damage of lock-down is considerable. Zero risk never exists in any society. We must respond to this anxiety without falling into the doctrine of zero risk."

In Spain, Fernando Simón, director of the Centre for the Coordination of Health Alerts and Emergencies, stated: “We cannot have our children without studying. We cannot jeopardise the competitiveness of our children,” he declared. Feigning sympathy with working class children, Simon pointed out that an “effort” must be made to open schools because “it is very easy to propose online education for those who have the right resources,” because “a child who has his own room, computer and good Wi-Fi is not the same as a child who shares a room with several siblings, parents, who does not have a computer or Wi-Fi.”

Leading political authorities throughout Europe have made similar cynical statements. They hide the fact that for over a decade they have starved schools of resources, while providing endless cash for bank and corporate bailouts, and while showering billions more into military contractors and imperialist wars. The pandemic has been seized to provide billions more for bank bailouts, all of which are being recouped from the population at the cost of lives and health of the working class.

Throughout the continent, resistance is growing against this policy. However, the trade unions, the main agents of the back-to-work campaign in the workplaces, are intervening to suppress growing opposition.

In the UK, where the National Education Union supports the reopening of schools in September, teachers held street protests yesterday across the country with demands such as free personal protective equipment (PPE), weekly COVID tests for teachers, and the ability to close classrooms if local infection rates hit a chosen level. While unions’ statements all talk about reopening safely, they are doing all in their power not to fight to make schools any safer or fight against the Tory government’s blatantly unsafe reopening plans.

In Germany, anger is rising among educators after at least 41 schools in Berlin reported that students or teachers have become infected, less than a fortnight after schools reopened in Germany. The Education and Science (GEW) trade union is supporting school reopenings, however. The GEW has even spoken out against the compulsory wearing of masks in the classroom, urgently demanded by virologists.

In France, despite the biggest weekly spike in confirmed coronavirus cases since the height of its

national outbreak in March, Macron insisted: “The return to school will happen in the coming days.” Despite the latest health protocol, adopted by Macron at the end of July relaxing social distancing, compulsory masks for teachers and mixing of students, the teachers union SNUipp-FSU’s main demand is to delay the start of the new school year by a few days.

SNUipp-FSU Secretary General Guislaine David said: “We are asking to postpone the start of the school year. ... Ideally, we would need the week of the 31st to be able to prepare for a peaceful return the following week.”

In Spain, teachers have been called on strike in the Madrid region at the start of the new term over the lack of any protocol for the reopening of schools in the region. While the sentiment is widespread throughout Spain, unions are calling for a strike only against the right-wing Popular-Party (PP) regional government. This allows the ruling parties, the Socialist Party (PSOE) and the “left populist” Podemos party, to get off free in regions they control.

The unions agree with the back-to-school policy. The CCOO general secretary for education, Isabel Galvín, explicitly stated: “We mobilise because we want to go back to school and remain. We don’t want to be confined the week we start. We are working hard so that all sectors return to their activity and we have to commit ourselves so that there are face-to-face classes. Children need to go back to school for their education and emotional stability.”

It is critical for workers and youth across Europe to set up their own action committees, independent of the trade unions, to prepare strike action against the reopenings of schools and the predictable rise in deaths they will provoke.



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