

# Open letter in *Le Soir*: Belgian ruling class calls to spread COVID-19

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On August 27, the francophone Belgian newspapers *La Libre Belgique* and *Le Soir* published an open letter signed by doctors, legal experts, economists, teachers and journalists. Titled “An open letter to our political leaders: It is urgent to totally review the handling of the Covid-19 crisis,” it denies outright the seriousness of the epidemic as well as the necessity of health measures taken to contain it.

With nearly 10,000 deaths for a population of less than 12 million, Belgium has suffered a horrific 853 deaths per million inhabitants, a mortality rate only surpassed by Peru. In spite of “sometimes terrifying conditions” in which many elderly Belgians died, according to Doctors without Borders, the Open Letter speaks not a word of compassion for the victims of the pandemic or their bereaved families (see: “The catastrophic fate of Belgium’s elderly in the coronavirus pandemic”). This chilling indifference is especially disturbing given the large number of doctors among the signatories.

The Open Letter, whose arguments are astonishingly impoverished given the professional qualifications of the signatories, sets out to minimize the catastrophe. It calls the coronavirus a “virus posing dangers no worse than the seasonal flu that we experience every year amid ‘near’ total indifference.”

The Open Letter carefully avoids citing figures for the number of lives lost to the pandemic. However, its reference to flu is a brazen lie. Seasonal flu in Belgium accounts for 10 times fewer deaths than has COVID-19 so far this year. According to the infectious disease specialist Yves Van Laethem, flu kills around 1,000 people per year in Belgium, with small variations from year to year. One would have to go back to the Hong Kong flu epidemic of 1968, the worst since Spanish flu in 1918-19, to observe a comparable number of deaths.

Unlike the flu, the population does not have antibodies against COVID-19, which is highly contagious; without lock-downs to contain it, the disease could easily infect 60 percent of the population. The rate of hospital admissions for COVID-19 is far superior to the flu, as is the mortality rate. This is why there are many gravely ill patients and deaths, despite lock-downs that succeeded in limiting infections to a relatively small fraction of the population.

The Open Letter denies the proven benefits of lock-downs, however, flatly stating: “There is no scientific basis to recommend isolating healthy people.”

In fact, due to the lack of preparation this spring, the lack of masks and protective equipment, and the impossibility of easily distinguishing the healthy from the sick, the epidemic surged across Belgium, Europe and internationally. Every contaminated person transmitted the disease to roughly three others, and the number of daily deaths doubled every two days on average at the pandemic’s peak intensity.

If lock-downs had been decided a week later, the peak in April deaths would therefore have been substantially higher, as well as the overall number of deaths. In France, the public hospitals in Paris, which were saturated with sick patients, openly acknowledged that they would have been overwhelmed if the lock-down had been decided one day later.

The Open Letter is not interested in scientific results, however, nor does it seek to honestly establish what health measures did or did not help treat the disease. It is above all a partisan attack against the lock-down policy. It tries to snow the reader in with dubious or discredited arguments: that some countries which did not impose lock-downs had as many or fewer deaths as countries which did; that lock-downs encourage domestic violence; and that they increase poverty,

which leads to deaths.

These arguments are a lying cover for the interests of the financial aristocracy. Its fundamental objection to lock-downs—namely, that too much money is spent saving the lives of people who are mostly workers or poor—also appears in the “Open Letter.” It laments, “On the economic level, 50 billion euros have evaporated. Never has so much money been invested to ‘save’ lives, even with regard to the insane estimations of the number of so-called avoided deaths (a figure which remains presently unknown).”

In reality, everything here is false: the number of deaths and their rise during the pandemic is fairly precisely known. As for the “evaporated” sums of money, it is not €50 billion but €2 trillion which have been allocated to European bank and corporate bailouts. Unemployment and poverty are surging, and small businesses are going bankrupt, not because the health system has tried to treat the disease, but because the banks and super-rich monopolize the resources of society.

The “Open Letter” spares the reader nothing as it lists various fallacious arguments to claim that nothing can or should be done to halt the spread of this deadly disease.

While declaring that “the wearing of masks has strictly no benefit” except possibly if “physical distancing cannot be met,” it adds: “Vaccines have immediately been presented to us as the sole solution to end the pandemic, whilst their harmlessness, efficiency and duration of protection are uncertain. Other solutions in the medium and long term must be envisaged, such as herd immunity.”

Herd immunity consists in allowing the maximum number of people to be infected, while hoping that the survivors will conserve an immunity which will slow down the virus’ spread in the broader population. That is the strategy of Donald Trump in America, claiming as nothing can be allowed to disturb the economy and extraction of profits, the disease should be given time to spread across the general population, whatever the resulting death toll. As a result, the world’s richest country has the most fatalities—191,481 to date.

It is a policy which, in order to preserve the fortunes and privileges of a parasitic ruling class, refuses to base itself on scientific knowledge and society’s capacity to organize itself to confront the virus. In spite of the

extraordinary progress of science since 1918-1919, it proposes to let COVID-19 infect and kill millions, as did the Spanish flu.

The letter shows that broad sections of the Belgian medical and academic community are susceptible to the class pressures exercised by the financial aristocracy as it demands a total, unrestricted re-opening of the economy. The “Open Letter” also demands the departure of experts who advise the government in order to get rid of everything faintly resembling a lock-down policy: “The legitimacy of the experts now in control must be put into question.”

Claiming that “the current climate of covidophobia is totally unjustified and generates harmful anxiety,” the letter demands the adoption of policies known to spread the virus: “The long-term risks associated with excess hygiene must be taken into account...Children must be able to return to nursery, primary and secondary school under normal conditions, allowing for basic hygiene measures like hand washing...University students must get back into the lecture halls and social life in general.”

These nauseating arguments underline the indifference of the ruling class to the number of deaths produced by the defense of its riches. Workers have the right to information and scientifically-founded perspectives in order to protect their lives and class interests. We invite our readers to share widely the WSWS analyses of the COVID-19 pandemic, and to form their own rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the state and trade unions, to watch out for their health and safety in the workplace and in the working-class neighborhoods.



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