

World Health Organization warns of “alarming” resurgence of COVID-19 in Europe

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On Thursday, the World Health Organization (WHO) regional director for Europe, Dr. Hans Kluge, warned that Europe faces a catastrophic resurgence of COVID-19.

Europe has seen over 228,000 COVID-19 deaths and five million cases, according to the WHO, mostly in a wave that peaked in March. However, as scientists had warned, the premature ending of lockdowns is producing an explosive resurgence of the virus. Even as hospital wards in Madrid and across southern France begin to fill and death rates mount, European governments continue to loosen social distancing and impose back-to-school and back-to-work policies that spread the virus.

Speaking at a WHO press conference in Copenhagen, Kluge said: “Weekly cases have now exceeded those reported when the pandemic first peaked in Europe in March. Last week, the region’s weekly tally exceeded 300,000 patients. More than half of European countries have reported a greater than 10 per cent increase in cases in the past two weeks. Of those, seven countries have seen newly reported cases increase more than twofold in the same period.”

Kluge called these “alarming rates of transmission across the region.” Yesterday’s figures provided a stark picture: Spain saw 11,291 confirmed new cases and 162 deaths; France, 10,593 cases and 50 deaths—both surpassing the largest daily infection totals this spring—and Britain, 3,395 cases and 21 deaths. The Czech Republic saw 2,136 new cases Wednesday, the first time this figure exceeded 2,000. Daily cases are rising in Germany (2,021), Italy (1,585), the Netherlands (1,753), Romania (1,679), and Belgium (1,153).

The reckless elimination of social distancing in schools and workplaces is having a devastating impact. “In the spring and early summer, we were able to see the impact of strict lockdown measures. Our efforts, our sacrifices,

paid off. In June cases hit an all-time low. The September case numbers, however, should serve as a wake-up call for all of us,” Kluge said, adding, “If you lift the pressure from the virus, naturally you’re going to see this increase.”

COVID-19 deaths follow the increase in cases with several weeks’ delay, and with deaths already increasing in Spain, it is only a matter of time before death totals explode across Europe.

WHO officials also warned against calls to slash the amount of time workers are legally allowed to self-isolate after being exposed to the virus. While it takes up to 14 days for an infected person to show symptoms, French officials are cutting quarantines to only seven days and British officials to only 10. Spain may cut the quarantine to seven or 10 days. This would ensure that infectious patients resume normal activities and spread the virus before finally falling ill.

“Knowing the immense individual and societal impact even a slight reduction in the length of quarantine can have... I encourage countries of the region to make scientific due process with their experts,” Kluge said.

WHO official Catherine Smallwood said the WHO is not changing the recommended quarantine length, indicating that the French and British proposals have no scientific basis: “Our quarantine recommendation of 14 days has been based on our understanding of the incubation period and transmission of the disease. We would only revise that on the basis of a change of our understanding of the science.”

Kluge said “prompt and resolute” action is required to prevent an overwhelming resurgence of COVID-19. Warning that “the virus has been merciless whenever partisanship and disinformation prevailed,” he said, “Where the pandemic goes from here is in our hands. We

have fought it back before, and we can fight it back again.”

The main obstacle to adopting a rational, scientifically based policy to fight the pandemic is the conscious hostility of Europe’s governments and financial aristocracy. All echo the positions of French President and investment banker Emmanuel Macron, who ruled out further lockdowns last month, telling *Paris Match*, “We cannot stop the entire country.”

Lockdowns were adopted this spring only after the collapse of Italy’s medical system under the weight of the COVID-19 pandemic in February and early March triggered a wave of wildcat strikes in Italian auto, steel and machine tool firms that spread across Europe.

The focus of European banks and officials this spring, however, was organizing a massive transfer of wealth to the super-rich. While the euro zone adopted €1.25 trillion in “quantitative easing” (QE) handouts to the banks and a €500 billion European Union (EU) corporate bailout, London adopted £635 billion in QE handouts and at least £110 billion in corporate bailouts. Afterwards, they focused on forcing children back to school so their parents could return to work to produce profits to back up the massive amounts of capital handed to the banks.

These bailouts have the unions’ enthusiastic support. The German Union Confederation (DGB) and France’s General Confederation of Labor (CGT) signed a joint statement explicitly endorsing the EU bailout negotiated primarily between Berlin and Paris. The union bureaucracies are complicit in the EU’s politically criminal pandemic response, which they play a leading role in organizing.

Only the independent intervention of the working class can impose necessary lockdown policies to halt the pandemic surge and avert a renewed, catastrophic loss of life. For this, however, workers need to organize independently of the union bureaucracies and their political allies, who are complicit in the murderous policies of the capitalist class.

In Spain, currently the pandemic’s European epicenter, health officials are urgently demanding lockdowns. In Madrid, the worst-hit region, Dr. Miguel Sanchez told ABC that emergency rooms are once again on the verge of collapse. With 24.4 percent of COVID-19 tests coming back positive, Dr. Cesar Carballo told Telemadrid: “It is already too late... It is no longer sufficient to lock down neighborhoods, we will have to put all of Madrid on lockdown.”

State-organized polls found that 56.8 percent of

Spaniards do not trust the state’s response, while 58.3 percent want “more demanding” isolation measures.

The Spanish Health Ministry said, however, that regional authorities alone now set policy. Madrid’s right-wing regional premier Isabel Ayuso has refused even “selective lockdowns” in the worst-hit neighborhoods. Ayuso, who has said she believes “practically all children, one way or another, will be infected” with COVID-19, appealed instead to fascistic sentiment, blaming the spread of the virus on “the lifestyles of our immigrants.”

In France, where hospitals in the Marseille and Bordeaux regions are beginning to overflow with severe COVID-19 patients, Health Minister Olivier Véran announced yesterday that France would maintain its unscientific seven-day quarantine policy despite WHO warnings. This came after Prime Minister Jean Castex again insisted that there will be no “all-out lockdown policy,” and that his government wants France to “live with the virus.”

The French government, which stepped up army deployments to major cities as the lockdown began this spring, is terrified of working class anger and is doubtless preparing repression of mass protests. Dr. Mathias Wargon, head of emergency care at Delafontaine hospital in Saint Denis, near Paris, said, “I have noticed that the Interior Ministry is taking back control from the Health Ministry. The Health Ministry no longer controls what happens, but the police prefects and state officials.”

IFOP pollster Frédéric Dabi told *Le Monde* that “public opinion is tired and worried... In this explosive and unpredictable context, the government is trying to ensure that the pressure cooker does not explode.”

The way forward for workers and students to protect themselves against the pandemic is to form independent safety committees in workplaces and schools across Europe and beyond. These committees can prepare a general strike against back-to-school policies and continued nonessential economic activity, and for the right to shelter at home under decent conditions. This requires above all a political struggle for the socialist reorganization of society and the abolition of the capitalist social order that is the root cause of the disastrous response to the pandemic.



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