

# PSOE, Podemos propose herd immunity as COVID-19 rips through Madrid

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This week, Spain's Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government reached a deal with Madrid regional authorities on policies for the working class districts hardest hit by the virus. Promoted as a "scientific" approach, these extremely limited measures, designed to permit the complete reopening of Spain's economy, amount to an endorsement of herd immunity policies by the PSOE and the "left populist" Podemos party. They will allow the virus to continue spreading massively.

Podemos' decision to adopt policies indistinguishable from those of countless reactionary capitalist governments is a warning. Its "left populist" affiliates internationally would all be prepared to implement similarly homicidal policies, whether Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France, Germany's Left Party, Syriza in Greece, or Bernie Sanders in America. For the working class, there is no electoral strategy to fight COVID-19, which requires an international turn to class struggle.

The pretext for the deal was the catastrophic health crisis in Madrid, where 500 people have died in the past two weeks. Spain's Health Ministry has registered 10,372 new cases, 43 percent of them in the Madrid region. Total infections in Spain now stand at a staggering 769,188, while official statistics show over 53,000 have died.

With the new rules, Spain will introduce restrictions in areas with over 100,000 population and 14-day cumulative incidence of 500 cases for every 100,000 people, where 10 percent of tests are coming back positive, and where more than 35 percent of ICU beds are taken up by COVID-19 patients.

These thresholds are far looser than those recommended by international organizations.

The World Health Organization (WHO) notes that when over 5 percent of PCR tests come back positive,

this can be considered to reflect community transmission. Yet 20 percent of PCR tests come back positive in Madrid, and 11 percent on average in Spain. The Harvard Global Health Institute also recommends issuing shelter-at-home orders when the incidence rate reaches 350 cases per 100,000 people. Madrid's figure is twice as high.

Under the PSOE-Podemos rules, once an area passes this threshold, such as most areas in Madrid, then entrances and exits will be restricted "except for those displacements, adequately justified." However, they make so many exceptions and justifications for displacements that employers and school authorities can require non-essential workers and students to continue going to school. This means they will continue to be exposed to the virus and transmit it.

Workers and youth can be required to violate the shelter-at-home order to guarantee "compliance with labour, professional, business or legal obligations" and "attendance at university, teaching and educational centres, including nursery schools." That is, the ruling elite's back-to-school and back-to-work campaigns must continue unabated.

In a city Madrid's size, this is useless. According to a 2018 survey, there are more than 2.2 million journeys a day between the city and the rest of the Madrid region's towns and cities. By a conservative estimate, at least 40 percent of the journeys are done for work or education purposes. Millions of trips will thus continue to take place.

In case these measures did not allow the virus to spread enough, the PSOE and Podemos add more exceptions to their restrictions. These include "assistance and care for the elderly, minors, dependents, people with disabilities or especially vulnerable people"; "travel to financial and insurance

entities that cannot be postponed”; “required or urgent actions before the public administration”; “renewals of permits and official documentation, as well as other administrative procedures that cannot be postponed”; and the “performance of exams or official tests that cannot be postponed.”

In fact, restrictions will mostly affect gatherings outside work and school. These gatherings will be limited to six people, children’s parks will be closed and all bars will shut, but only by 10 p.m. At the same time, the ruling class is blaming the resurgence of COVID-19 on Spain’s “family-oriented culture,” hugs and kisses, and youth parties.

In short, the restrictions aim to lull the population to sleep, arguing that the ruling class is implementing scientific health care policies, when in fact it is implementing a herd immunity policy of allowing the virus to spread in Spain and across Europe.

In the UK, there is a 10:00 p.m. curfew for all pubs and restaurants and a banning of gatherings of over six people. On Thursday, French Health Minister Olivier Véran warned that Paris had surpassed the thresholds and entered the “maximum alert” level, which could mean closing bars and restaurants.

After striking the deal with the PSOE-Podemos government on Tuesday, the right-wing regional administration in Madrid suddenly opposed it at the last minute, filing an appeal to Spain’s High Court. Madrid health chief Enrique Ruiz Escudero claimed these measures would cost the economy €8 billion.

In truth, the measures differ little from those Madrid already implemented over the past two weeks. The pro-PSOE daily *El País* acknowledged that “The appeal ignores the fact, however, that the regional government itself has already implemented the same measures in 45 basic health care areas in the Spanish capital and surrounding areas.”

A gulf is opening between the entire political establishment on the one hand and the working class on the other.

Scientists are alarmed at the criminal policies being pursued. Javier del Águila, a preventive medicine and public health specialist, told *El País* restrictions of mobility are “like discussing whether to act when the fire has already reached the foundations of the building, or a little earlier.” He said: “We’re running late for mild measures such as reducing capacity at bars and

restaurants. ... [R]ight now we are in a situation where you need to ask or force people to stay home.”

While the scientific evidence and common sense dictate that a shelter-at-home order is required, Podemos is making clear they will not tolerate any measures that cut across the ruling class’ profit interests, even if this means that the virus will rage on. Precisely for this reason, after endorsing small protests against the Madrid right-wing government, they quickly backed down, calling the protests off once they started to receive a wider audience. They are terrified that protests can erupt into a far larger movement.

Nonetheless, spontaneous protests calling for more spending on public health and less for police and the military are continuing each day, especially in working class neighbourhoods.

The vast majority of the population demand stricter measures. Even when millions of workers and small businesses endured serious losses under a capitalist lockdown in which their salary and business losses were not covered, nearly 60 percent of respondents in the latest state poll in Spain wanted “more demanding” isolation measures. Contrary to the myth of popular irresponsibility promoted by the ruling class, more than 84 percent of Spain’s population wear masks every day.

The past nine months have demonstrated that the fight against the pandemic depends upon the independent intervention of the working class. It is urgent for workers across Europe and internationally to organize workplace safety committees independently of the unions and prepare a general strike to halt the rapid resurgence of COVID-19. This struggle can only proceed on an international basis and based on intransigent opposition against the union bureaucracies and allied “left populist” parties like Podemos.



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