

As pandemic surges worldwide, governments resist new lockdowns, step up back-to-work drive

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The past week has seen a substantial shift in the number of new cases of COVID-19 globally. Over the weekend, new highs approaching 360,000 daily cases worldwide were recorded.

The upward trajectory was already evident last month, under conditions where all governments had launched drives to reopen the schools and campuses, with no serious safety measures in place, no approved vaccines and no containment of the pandemic. The result has predictably been a surge in infections and deaths. But the capitalist governments deem the reopening of the schools as essential to forcing workers back onto the job and increasing corporate profits.

Globally there are at present 37.7 million cases and 1.08 million deaths. Active cases now number over 8.3 million, which indicates that the present transmission rate remains remarkably high.

Whereas over the summer the United States, Brazil and India accounted for the highest number of new cases, over the last two weeks Europe has seen an even more rapid rise in new infections, at levels far higher than those experienced by Europe previously. Spain, France and the United Kingdom now equal the United States in daily new confirmed cases per million.

Behind these epidemiological statistics are mounting fears in financial circles, despite the ongoing stock market boom, of a worsening economic crisis. As the *Financial Times* noted: “With the second wave of coronavirus undermining efforts to return to normal, businesses’, households’ and investors’ confidence shaken, and little scope for additional monetary policy stimulus, most countries have a long way to go before output reaches pre-pandemic levels.”

According to the latest Brookings-*Financial Times* tracking index, significant doubts remain of a “robust”

recovery. The stock market surge has depended on near-zero interest rates maintained by the Federal Reserve in the US and central banks around the world, plus trillions of dollars in public funds handed over to the corporate-financial oligarchy during the pandemic. But the real economy is in the deepest slump since the Great Depression. Brookings and the *Financial Times* write that “private consumption growth has slowed as fiscal stimulus measures wind down, which has led to a decline in household disposable income, and prospects of further stimulus remain uncertain.”

The euro zone, including Germany, the United Kingdom and Japan, are in perilous shape as they face severe and prolonged economic contractions. Despite remarks in the press about China leading a global recovery, there is doubt that China will provide a substantial lift to international demand. Meanwhile, poorer nations face a calamitous situation.

At the same time, rising cases and growing hospitalizations are placing significant pressures to respond to the crisis. Nevertheless, the policy of “herd immunity” continues to be prosecuted as every government emphatically resists future lockdowns or other broad-based containment efforts. The European governments are following the same basic path spearheaded by the Trump administration in the US, no less dictated by the interests of the banks and corporations.

In the face of an explosive growth of infections, the Spanish government imposed a state of emergency allowing it to maintain a partial lockdown on Madrid, affecting nearly 4.8 million people. The city’s hospitals have seen a surge of new patients admitted with COVID-19.

There were over 12,000 new cases on October 8 and

241 deaths on October 9. COVID-19 patients account for 40 percent of all ICU beds.

Businesses and local authorities, however, are resisting these new restrictions. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, the Spanish economy, heavily reliant on tourism, is expected to contract between 10.5 and 12.6 percent in 2020. The *Journal* added that “the center-right regional government opposed the restrictions and appealed to the courts to overturn the order.” The Madrid High Court ruled that the restrictions would infringe on “citizen’s fundamental rights,” creating a situation ripe for social strife.

COVID-19 cases in France are rising at a substantial pace, three times higher than the April peaks. On Saturday, health authorities reported close to 27,000 new cases. According to the Associated Press, 40 percent of the Paris region’s ICU beds are now occupied by COVID-19 patients. As in Spain, the number of deaths has been rising. Dr. Karim Debbat, who runs a small ICU ward in the Southern city of Arles, told the AP that he simply did not have additional places for patients. He said he was scrambling to convert recovery rooms and delaying elective surgeries.

President Macron has defended his abysmal record. When confronted by protesting Paris health care workers demanding increased investments in hospital systems, he disparagingly said, “It’s no longer a question of resources, it’s a question of organization.” Little has been done to prepare for a second wave and, after years of austerity, the health system has been left in shambles. France’s ICU capacity stands at 6,000 and over 1,400 ICU beds are already occupied.

The United Kingdom has also seen an explosion of new cases, with a single-day high of 17,540 infections on October 8. There were 81 fatalities on Saturday, with trends edging higher after summer lows in single digits. Hospital admissions have climbed by 50 percent. With more than 3,000 COVID-19 patients being treated in British hospitals, Britain’s deputy chief medical officer, Jonathan Van-Tam, told members of parliament (MPs) that the ICUs in the North West could reach capacity in the next few weeks.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson is set to make a statement to parliament today on implementing partial lockdowns to stem the rapid rise in cases of COVID-19. The new wave has devastated the UK’s testing and tracing program, as delays in results hamper efforts to get ahead of the deluge.

Sean Donnelly, deputy leader of Knowsley Council, said to the *Financial Times*, “The virus has spread right

across the community. We are seeing lots among the older population. I wish we could pinpoint how it is spreading. We don’t know. We need a total lockdown.”

Much of the blame for the surge is being placed on the return of university students to large campuses and packed residence halls.

Johnson is expected to face significant opposition from within his Conservative Party. Dozens of Tory MPs oppose his plans for new restrictions, claiming that rules to prevent “social mixing” are not working. Some have aligned themselves with the so-called “Swedish model” policy of “herd immunity,” which claims, falsely, to protect the elderly while allowing the virus to infect the younger population. Graham Brady, a Tory MP, said that “these rules are a massive intrusion into the liberty and private lives of the whole British people, and they’re having a devastating economic effect as well.”

Germany has seen a surge of new COVID-19 cases in line with the rest of the major European nations. German politicians and Merkel will meet Wednesday to discuss the imposition of further restrictions.

Russia saw a single-day high on Saturday, with 12,846 COVID-19 cases, but the Kremlin resisted lockdowns, merely warning people to stay home over the weekend. The health minister told Reuters that the government is hoping to begin mass vaccinations this month, despite the fact that the Russian-developed vaccine has not been fully tested.

In line with global developments, the United States has seen a sudden surge in daily cases, exceeding 60,000 on Friday. As the *New York Times* reported, there has been a 12 percent increase over a two-week period.

With the US poised to reach eight million cumulative cases today and 220,000 deaths, many in the media are referring to the situation as a “third wave,” a product of school and university openings. Eleven states have set records for seven-day moving averages of new cases, and 13 states have reported positivity rates higher than 10 percent. Over the past week, New York City reported an average of 574 cases per day, an increase of 60 percent from the average two weeks earlier and the highest number since June.



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