French, Spanish hospital workers protest as COVID-19 spreads across Europe

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Anger is growing among healthcare workers across Europe, with demonstrations and strike actions organized by nurses and doctors in France and Spain this week. The protests are driven by demands for desperately-needed resources for hospital workers to fight against the coronavirus pandemic, and against the "herd immunity" policy that underlie the European states' response to the virus.

The protests take place as Europe is once again emerging as a global hot spot of the pandemic, with France, the UK and Spain leading the continent in total number of cases.

Today, French nurses will protest outside hospitals and in local city centers, with the largest demonstration to be held in Paris, to call for wage rises, more hospital beds, and more staff.

Statements by nurses to the media and on social media have denounced the conditions in the hospitals, including a shortage of personal protective equipment and staff as Europe is threatened again with overflowing emergency rooms. "I did not sign for this," Sophie, a nurse in Val-de-Marne told the *Le Parisien*. "We cannot accept anymore the pressure, the extra unpaid hours."

"Among ourselves, we call each other the invisibles," Christina, 46, told the newspaper. "The epidemic was the last straw," she said, "we were applauded and then nothing."

On Twitter, Arthur, a 33-year-old nurse, said, "Our healthcare system is collapsing. Real action is needed now."

A poll of 60,000 nurses organized by the Order of Nurses, and whose results were published by *Le Parisien* on October 10, revealed that 33 percent of nurses said they were in burnout before the crisis. This figure had almost doubled to 57 percent today.

The day of action was called by a group of trade unions, including the General Confederation of Labour (CGT), the Sud union, and the General Confederation of Management, as well as the Inter-Urgences collective of emergency room workers.

The role of the CGT and the other major unions is particularly cynical. Only four months ago, on July 10, the unions announced an agreement with the Macron administration for a healthcare funding bill that worsened conditions in hospitals, the same bill that is being now widely denounced by health workers. It provided an inadequate pay increase of 180 euros per month to nurses, included no pledge to reopen beds, of which more than 17,000 have been closed in just the last six years, and loosened 35-hour week guarantees for nurses.

The CGT did not sign the agreement, because the deal could already pass with the signatures of the French Democratic Labor Confederation (CFDT), National Union of Autonomous Unions (UNSA), and Workers Force (FO). But it sought to prevent any mobilization of health workers against the deal, publishing an announcement declaring, "Even if the agreement may be disappointing, we have to acknowledge all the same that it's thanks to the mobilisation of staff over recent years, and thanks to the unions, that we've been able to [obtain] … this wage increase."

In Spain, protests have been organized over several weeks by doctors and other health workers. On Tuesday, hundreds of doctors went on strike in Catalonia to demand better working conditions.

Natalia Ross, a doctor who participated in a protest in Barcelona on Tuesday, told *Swiss Info*, "We are asking for help, because we cannot give people the resources they need to be treated during this coronavirus

pandemic." The protest action reportedly involves 5,900 doctors across Catalonia.

The growing anger of health workers comes as the virus accelerates rapidly in France, Spain and across Europe, and as hospital workers are once again threatened with an overflow of emergency rooms. The spread of the virus is the predictable and predicted outcome of the policies of the European governments, which have reopened their economies, returning millions to their workplaces and schools, allowing the virus to spread in order to resume the flow of profits to private corporations.

On Monday, Aurélien Rousseau of the Regional Health Agency reported that 17 percent of tests in the Ile-de-France region around Paris were positive, the highest level ever reached. There are 474 people with coronavirus in reanimation beds in hospital, making up 42 percent of all the reanimation patients.

Rousseau reported that in Paris alone on Monday, "among 20-30 year-olds there was an estimated 800 positive cases per 100,000 people in the population. And above all, for the past three days … these figures have increased rapidly among the elderly."

"We know what will happen in the next 15 days," he said, "and especially that we are going to have more grave cases," noting that all hospitals had been placed in "crisis mode."

There have been 362,000 coronavirus cases in France in the month from September 15 to October 13. In Europe, France is followed by Spain and the UK, with 295,000 and 249,000 cases over the same period, respectively. In terms of number of cases per 100,000 people, however, the Czech Republic is first, with 800 cases per 100,000, followed by Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands, and France.

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