

COVID-19 resurgence devastates Spanish working class

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With coronavirus cases rising rapidly across Spain, it is devastating the lives and livelihoods of workers. Last Wednesday, Spain passed the threshold of 900,000 cases, having recorded half a million infections in less than two months. This puts Spain at seventh in the world by total number of cases. As Spain officially records 12–15,000 new positive tests a day, it will reach the grim milestone of one million total infections within days.

The official death toll stands at well over 30,000, while new figures from the National Institute of Statistics (INE) indicate that just under 59,000 excess deaths have occurred since the pandemic began. Around 11,000 have died since July alone according to INE, more than double the Health Ministry's official figures, which recorded 5,400 fatalities. Daily deaths range between around 100 and 250.

The Madrid region, hit hardest by the resurgence of the virus, is hiding the true extent of the resurgence, tampering with its daily figures to downplay the threat to life. Over the last months, it has omitted thousands of cases from its daily tallies, before retroactively modifying the infection figures as much as a fortnight later, without notifying the public.

On 2 October, for example, Madrid published figures indicating that 1,005 new coronavirus cases had been detected in the region the previous day; a week later, going back to the official statistics, this figure had been changed to 2,422—more than double the initial announcement. An even larger discrepancy can be seen in the infection statistics reported on 24 September, when 828 positive cases were originally announced. But by 13 October, that day's figures were nearly five times as high, at 4,324.

Even as COVID-19 rips across Spain and the world, the Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government is refusing to take any serious measures to contain it. Schools, universities and non-essential workplaces remain open,

providing perfect breeding grounds for the coronavirus.

On Friday, limited measures came into effect in Catalonia, in response to a sharp uptick in infections, with cases rising by 40 percent in just one week. The restrictions, set to last a fortnight, close all bars and restaurants, although they can still provide takeaway service. Shops are limited to 30 percent of their usual capacity, cinemas and theatres to 50 percent.

Arcades, amusement parks, bingo halls and casinos will also have to close, while parks and children's play areas must shut at 8pm. While theory-based university lessons will move online, workshops, practicals and research activities will still meet on campus.

There are no changes to in-person education for children under age 18: schools, colleges and nurseries remain open—guaranteeing the continued spread of the disease. Education centres are hotspots for the virus: 1,664 schools across Catalonia have completely or partially quarantined classes after detecting coronavirus outbreaks. These measures affect nearly 40,000 pupils in the region, over 1,800 teachers and around 300 other education workers.

The pandemic continues to disproportionately affect the working class and poor, belying the tired bourgeois slogan that “we're all in this together.” Even as virus cases rocket upwards, there is no talk in the ruling class of allowing workers in non-essential industries to shelter at home to protect themselves from the potentially deadly disease. Workers are still expected to show up at factories, offices and other workplaces in Catalonia, with “work-related activities” one of the many exceptions to the region's “rule-of-six” group size limit.

In Madrid, hospitalisation figures demonstrate the pandemic's horrific impact on the poorest and more vulnerable, particularly immigrant workers, who often live in crowded flats and face unsafe workplaces. In Madrid's University Hospital 12 de Octubre, 90 percent of patients hospitalised with coronavirus in September

came from poor backgrounds. Most virus-related hospital admissions across the city were of workers from immigrant backgrounds aged 30 to 60.

A nurse from the capital's La Paz University Hospital described the situation facing migrant workers: "These migrants are mostly poor and have a worse immune response ... Living in badly ventilated apartments probably means that they are getting infected with a greater viral load, as well as having a worse diet and immune response. They are the ones who suffer most during this pandemic, alongside the elderly."

In a testament to the irrationality of capitalism, despite a vast resurgence of the pandemic in Spain, around 2,000 jobs in health and social care were lost in September, according to public sector union Central Sindical Independiente y de Funcionarios (CSIF). Though the PSOE-Podemos government promised 50,000 new healthcare professionals would be hired to combat the pandemic, the Nursing Union (SATSE) estimates that Spain's primary care centres still lack around 15,500 nurses.

Spanish hospitals are already struggling to cope with the surge in coronavirus admissions, which will only mount as the winter flu season nears. Warnings are already been made that hospitals will be overwhelmed this winter, as the second wave of COVID-19 coincides with a surge in flu patients.

Currently, one in five (18.8 percent) Intensive Care Unit (ICU) beds in Spain are occupied by coronavirus patients, according to Health Ministry figures. This rises to over a third of beds in the worst-affected regions of Madrid (37.43 percent), Aragón (34.20 percent) and La Rioja (33.33 percent). Provincial government data often paint an even starker picture: in Aragón, for example, over half (51.16 percent) of ICU beds were occupied by coronavirus patients.

COVID-19's impact on the working class is not just medical, but also economic and social. A recent Oxfam report indicates that the pandemic will push a further 1.1 million Spaniards into poverty without greater action to protect education, health and social security. This would bring the number of workers in Spain in poverty to 10.9 million, up from a fifth (20.7 percent) of the population before the pandemic to almost a quarter (23.07 percent).

International Monetary Fund (IMF) projections indicate that Spain's economy is on the verge of collapse, having seen the largest drop in GDP this year of all advanced economies. Spain's deficit will rise to 14.1 percent of GDP this year and its national debt to 123 percent,

remaining at around 120 percent of GDP until 2025. Spain's economy will not recover to pre-pandemic levels until at least 2023, the IMF predicts, after contracting 12.8 percent in 2020, the biggest decrease in Spain's history and the largest in the euro zone.

The IMF also predicted that Spain's unemployment figures will not return to pre-pandemic levels until 2026. Unemployment in Spain will remain at 16.8 percent this year and the next, the IMF predicts, making it the second-worst country in Europe after Greece (19.9 percent). Around 965,000 jobs were destroyed in Spain this year due to COVID-19; the IMF forecast that only one in five, or 187,000 jobs in total, will be recovered next year.

Between November 1 and the end of 2020, hundreds of thousands of Spanish workers will likely be made unemployed, as a clause in Spain's ERTE furlough scheme requiring employers to keep workers on payroll comes to an end. The General Council of Administrative Agents of Spain expects 200,000-300,000 job losses—in addition to the loss of around 150,000 self-employed workers' jobs—with shop, hospitality and restaurant workers worst affected.

Thousands of job cuts have already been announced across Spain, particularly in aviation and manufacturing. Aerospace company Airbus plans to lay off 889 workers in Spain, while ITP Aero will make 600 unemployed and Aernnova will fire 950 workers, including 650 in Spain. Indra, a firm specialising in aviation, information technologies and defence systems has initiated proceedings to lay off 6,000 workers.



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