

As COVID-19 surges in Europe, governments protect profits over lives

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After over 9 million cases and 250,000 deaths from COVID-19 this year, Europe stands on the brink of catastrophe. The resurgence of the virus has made clear that European governments' ending of lockdowns this spring was disastrously premature. It led to a global resurgence of the disease, especially in Europe, that now threatens to completely overwhelm Europe's medical system.

Each day, Europe now records over 200,000 new cases and 2,000 deaths from COVID-19, figures that are doubling approximately every 10 days. If this trend is not stopped, it is a matter of only weeks before hospitals in the worst-hit countries are overrun and masses of people are cut off from treatment. Half of France's assisted breathing hospital beds and over a quarter of Spain's are already occupied by severe COVID-19 cases. Countries like Britain, Italy and Poland, which record around 20,000 daily cases, or Germany and Belgium, with around 14,000, are at most a few weeks behind.

Europe is teetering on the brink of a loss of life on a scale it has not seen since the world wars of the 20th century. Several millions of lives are at stake. In March, German intelligence prepared a report stating that over a million people would die in Germany if the virus spread through the population. Last night, in a national televised address, French President Emmanuel Macron estimated that 400,000 people could die in France unless emergency measures are taken.

Faced with mounting public anger and growing calls from medical authorities for shelter-at-home orders to avert catastrophe, European governments are suddenly announcing they are considering or re-imposing lockdowns. After Ireland and Wales both announced lockdowns last week, Macron last night declared a four-week, renewable lockdown in France.

These official announcements are not, however, shelter-at-home orders allowing youth and all non-essential workers to stay home and avoid infection. As they impose new lockdowns, European governments have the same goal that led them to prematurely lift the previous lockdowns: keeping youth at school and workers at work to produce profits for the financial aristocracy.

Workers must be warned: the lockdowns proposed by European governments will not halt the pandemic or avert a disastrous loss of life. Imposing a genuine shelter-at-home policy to protect the population from the global pandemic requires an independent, international mobilization of the working class against the European governments.

Germany and France both adopted partial lockdowns yesterday, closing cultural institutions and restaurants for a month. Chancellor Angela Merkel's "decision paper" states that "schools and kindergartens remain open," and aims "to ensure that industry, trade and small and medium-sized enterprises can work safely as much as possible." Macron said, "Schools will stay open, work will continue, retirement homes will be open for visiting." And so, the virus will continue to spread.

In countries across Europe where stricter confinement measures have been adopted, non-essential industry and schools remain open. The Irish government announced a "six-week coronavirus lock-down," limiting citizens' movements to a five-kilometer radius of their homes. However—unlike the March lockdown—schools, construction sites and industry remain open, including meat-processing plants that are hot spots for new outbreaks.

While claiming to pursue lockdowns, European governments are thus essentially continuing their

murderous strategy of “herd immunity,” letting the virus keep spreading through the population.

Control of health policy cannot be left in the hands of the capitalist class. The force that can be mobilized to impose a rational, scientifically based policy is the European working class, fighting on an international and socialist perspective independently of the trade union bureaucracies to expropriate the ill-gotten wealth of the financial aristocracy.

It was the working class that imposed the first lockdowns this spring. A wave of wildcat strikes that began in Italian auto, steel and engineering plants in early March spread across Spain, France and Britain—cutting supply chains and bringing industry across Europe to a halt. As COVID-19 ripped through the population, European governments, shocked by the movement from below, suddenly changed course and implemented lockdowns.

It is critical to draw political lessons from this experience. While the working class demonstrated its ability to impose a scientifically grounded policy, it was a spontaneous movement. Once strikes were ended and the initial lockdowns adopted, state power and control of the banks and industrial life remained in the hands of the financial aristocracy and the various union bureaucracies. Europe’s population is now paying a bitter price for this.

Governments did not aim to save lives, but to save the wealth of the super-rich. Britain adopted a £645 billion bank bailout, the euro zone a €1.25 trillion bank bailout and a €750 billion European Union corporate bailout. Apart from a tiny fraction spent on unemployment insurance and small business loans, these sums went to bailing out the bank accounts and stock portfolios of the super-rich and retooling big European corporations to compete with America and China.

A column in *Le Monde* stated that the growing global struggle between the major capitalist powers over markets precluded a lasting shelter-at-home policy and required death on a mass scale. “New strategies for onshoring plants, diversifying supply chains, and controlling key technologies, which Europe and the United States were already studying, are now an absolute priority,” it wrote, adding, “This is why the Trump administration is making the terrible choice of the ‘business first’ option, sacrificing part of its

population to not leave Chinese power an open field.”

The European bourgeoisie has also pursued this policy. With the collaboration of the trade unions and pseudoleft parties such as Podemos in Spain and the Left Party in Germany, which signaled their support for the EU bailouts, governments launched a back-to-work drive. No lie—that children do not spread the virus, or that there is no money to help workers and small businesses weather a longer lockdown—was too outrageous as they bludgeoned workers back to work to produce profits to back up the massive sums of public money given to the super-rich.

Halting the pandemic and imposing a scientific shelter-at-home policy has proven impossible in the framework of European capitalism. It requires a conscious political mobilization of the working class across Europe against capitalism, on a socialist program. It entails a struggle to crush the power of the financial aristocracy, impound public funds illegitimately given to the super-rich in trade union-backed bailouts, and provide the necessary resources to dramatically improve health care and support workers and small businesses as they weather the pandemic.

The European sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) have called for the formation of independent workplace safety committees in factories, offices and schools to prepare international general strike action against the bourgeoisie’s politically criminal policies on the pandemic. This can pave the way for the expropriation of the financial aristocracy and the socialist reorganization of society on a rational, scientific basis to address the needs of the population. It requires the overthrow of the European Union by the working class and the construction of the United Socialist States of Europe.



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