Europe’s COVID-19 pandemic spirals out of control

Alex Lantier
3 November 2020

Yesterday, teachers walked out of classes in dozens of schools across France as students returned from holidays to the first classes since President Emmanuel Macron announced a new lockdown. It has not taken long for the political fraud of the lockdowns now being declared by governments across Europe to become apparent to broad layers of youth and working people.

Announcing the lockdown last week, Macron said elementary and middle school students would continue attending school so their parents could continue working. As the health ministry estimated that two-thirds of transmission clusters are at school or work, Macron pledged that reinforced security protocols would limit the spread of the virus. This pledge was worthless. Current security protocols insist that social distancing be implemented only “to the extent that it is possible,” and that it is “not required for students in the same class or year level.”

And so, as a quarter million new cases of COVID-19 are found each day in Europe—with 52,518 in France, 22,253 in Italy, 21,926 in Switzerland, 18,950 in Britain, 18,340 in Spain, 15,578 in Poland and 13,125 in Germany—teachers and students are still crammed 30 to a classroom in schools.

Students in France are joining high school students in Greece and Poland who have launched mass school occupations and protests. Youth across Europe face a political struggle.

European governments are acting with contempt for the lives of the population. Even after Macron said that 400,000 Frenchmen could die of COVID-19 if emergency measures were not taken, Paris, London and Berlin all implemented lockdowns which, unlike lockdowns this spring, demand that children and non-essential workers keep going to school and work to be infected.

France’s Scientific Council estimated Friday that such lockdowns cut COVID-19’s reproduction rate (R0) to only between 0.9 and 1.2, meaning the number of daily new cases will fall only very slowly, or even keep growing exponentially. “There is great uncertainty on the effectiveness of the new, less stringent measures,” warned Scientific Council member Simon Cauchemez. With France’s ventilator beds already half full with COVID-19 patients, Spain’s a quarter full, and the rest of Europe only a few weeks behind, a breakdown of the health system is looming.

European governments’ pretensions to have handled the pandemic more intelligently than the Trump administration have been exposed as a cynical and deadly fraud. European heads of state did not, perhaps, act with quite the same crass arrogance of America’s billionaire real estate speculator president. They did not refuse to wear masks, compare COVID-19 to the flu, or boast after catching the virus of the exceptional quality of the medical care they received compared to that available to the overwhelming majority of workers in their countries.

Behind the appearance of competence, however, there was lying on a massive scale. Sweden’s “herd immunity” policy—letting the virus rip through the country, hoping the population would eventually become immune—led to a death rate nine times higher than neighboring Finland. Yet this policy was was adopted by all the European governments.

Like officials across Europe, Sweden’s chief epidemiologist Anders Tegnell denied he was pursuing a herd immunity policy. Yet in a subsequently declassified March 14 email he sent to Finnish officials, Tegnell argued for “keeping schools open to reach herd immunity more quickly.” That is, like the Macron government today, he was advocating keeping schools

© World Socialist Web Site

open so that the virus would spread among teachers and students and then the broader working population.

While Britain's chief scientific advisor Sir Patrick Vallance said, "It's not possible to stop everyone getting it, and it's also not desirable," German Chancellor Angela Merkel's Interior Ministry secretly reported that the unchecked spread of the virus could cost 1 million German lives in 2020. Yet "Mommy Merkel," as the press markets her to the German people, went before the public and blandly predicted that 70 percent of the German population would become infected.

The crisis of the pandemic cannot be resolved simply by removing Trump or another individual capitalist politician from office. The European governments all pursued essentially the same policy as Trump, but paid somewhat more attention to skillful political deceit. And today, around 2,500 people across Europe die of COVID-19 each day—1,000 more than in North America.

What compelled the adoption of lockdowns in Europe was the intervention of the working class. In March, a wave of wildcat strikes demanding a shelter-at-home policy in auto, steel and engineering plants across Italy, initially the worst-hit country, spread to Spain, France, Britain and beyond. Europe's capitalist governments, on the other hand, tried to encourage as much complacency as possible, pushing for a premature return to work and to school even before the number of new cases had fallen to zero. The disastrous consequences of this policy are now apparent.

Workers and youth entering into struggle against Europe's murderous COVID-19 policy should reject with contempt the argument that there is no money for a shelter-at-home policy, the only way to contain the virus and avert a meltdown of the hospital system. The European Union (EU) adopted a €2 trillion bank and corporate bailout scheme, and Britain a £645 billion bank bailout. There is, in fact, plenty of money to spend on ensuring that workers, the self-employed and small business owners can shelter at home while maintaining their incomes and livelihoods.

The inability of governments in Europe, as in America, to act decisively to stop the pandemic reflects the bankruptcy of capitalism: such action would cut across the material interests of the ruling class. The EU governments, like Trump and the Democrats, intend for these resources to go to bail out the stock portfolios of the billionaires and boost the profits of big businesses, not to save lives.

A slice of these funds was filtered through countless corporate works councils and foundations to union officials and their political allies so they would help implement back-to-work policies. And this fall, as the number of cases surged, public anger mounted and pressure grew on governments to implement lock-downs, the unions and their allies organized no action. Even yesterday, Spain's "left populist" Podemos party, in a coalition government with the social democrats, rejected calls from Asturias regional authorities for a shelter-at-home policy.

The way forward for workers and youth against the pandemic is to form their own rank-and-file security committees in workplaces and schools, independent of the union bureaucracies, to monitor health and safety at work and prepare a broader struggle. Fighting a global failure of the capitalist system that threatens a catastrophic loss of life requires the mobilization of the collective industrial and social strength of the working class. The European sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International have advanced the call for a European and international general strike.

To prepare such an action, however, means to take up a political struggle for socialism. Only the impounding of the ill-gotten wealth of the super-rich and the struggle of the working class to take power and organize economic life on the basis of social need, rather than private profit, can avert a health catastrophe. In Europe, this means supporting the struggle of the working class to bring down the EU, take state power, and build the United Socialist States of Europe.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site