

Spain's PSOE-Podemos government rejects calls for shelter-at-home policy

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Spain's Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government is rejecting regional authorities' requests to impose a shelter-at-home order. In the absence of a COVID-19 vaccine, this is the only policy to bring the virus under control and avert a horrific loss of life amid a devastating resurgence of the virus. This decision underscores the political criminality of the Spanish government and, in particular, of the "left populist" Podemos party, which is keeping workers at work and children at school so that massive profits can continue accruing to the banks and major investors.

Spain is one of the hardest hit countries in Europe, with a total of 35,878 deaths and 1,264,517 infections, although deaths could be as many as 60,000 and infections around 3 million. It has added 7,100 COVID-19 fatalities to the official death toll since July. If the rate does not slow, Spain will have another 8,000 more COVID-19 fatalities by Christmas. Yesterday, the Ministry of Health reported 55,019 new cases over the weekend.

The virus is spreading rapidly, particularly in schools. Nearly 6,000 classrooms had to close because of COVID-19 cases in October, up from the 3,850 in September. In total, 159 schools have closed and 1,578 teachers have been infected, according to the Education Workers Union.

In this context, the northern region of Asturias asked the central PSOE-Podemos government to authorize a 15-day shelter-at-home in a bid to contain the contagion.

At a press conference held after an urgent meeting of the region's COVID-19 Crisis Committee, Asturian regional premier Adrián Barbón said that the region was struggling to contain the virus. Asturias has already seen more than 400 infections per 100,000 inhabitants, and its hospitals and intensive care units (ICUs) are on

the verge of collapse. On each of the last eight days of October, the region saw more than 3,000 infections.

Barbón said the committee is worried at "the growth in hospitalizations. If we continue at this rate and we not be able to control the spread or hospitalizations, we could reach a limit situation."

Barbón's urgent call exposes the central government's pretensions that limited measures like midnight-6:00 a.m. curfews, limiting meetings to six people and closing bars and hotels, while allowing non-essential work and forcing children back to school, would contain the virus.

In a matter of a few hours, however, the PSOE-Podemos government dismissed calls for a shelter-at-home policy. Health Minister Salvador Illa said: "Now we do not foresee it. We are not working on it, nor do we foresee it. We think that with the range of measures that are available to the authorities of the regional governments are enough."

Government sources told Spanish public television channel RTVE: "What is proposed is what is approved, and there are no other proposals."

Even as a record number of 25,595 new cases were confirmed on Friday, Illa cynically told the Spanish population to wait and see whether his government's limited measures had any impact on the pandemic: "When you implement measures, they can take between 10 to 15 days to see the results. Therefore, we must have patience and know how to wait long enough to be able to see the effects of very drastic measures, and not enter into a kind of competition to see who takes the toughest measure."

After Asturias, Spain's African enclave, Melilla, also requested a shelter-at-home policy. On Sunday night, the enclave formally requested the central government assess shelter-at-home policy and suspend face-to-face

teaching.

Last week, the health chief of Castilla y León, asked the central government for the legal tools required to apply shelter-at-home if there was no improvement in the region's epidemiological data. Other Spanish regions, including Catalonia and Andalusia, are also debating such requests.

Meanwhile, scientists are demanding the immediate implementation of the a shelter-at-home policy. Tomás Cobo, the vice president of the Collegiate Medical Organization told *El País* last week that “Confinement is the only measure that is scientifically proven,” adding: “the rest [of the measures implemented to date] are just trial and error.”

José Martínez Olmos, the former general secretary of the Health Ministry and a professor at the Andalusian School of Public Health, told the same daily: “It will be difficult to avoid confinement with these figures we have in the regions.”

The only way forward is an independent mobilisation of the European and international working class. It was the independent intervention of the workers that compelled the adoption of lock-down policies this spring in Europe, with wildcat strikes at auto plants, steel, engineering and food processing plants shutting down supply chains and forcing EU governments to adopt shelter-at-home orders. The working class' intervention saved millions of lives.

Today, there is no question that the closure of non-essential businesses, combined with massive investments in public health, testing, quarantining and contact tracing are the only scientific policy to combat the virus. To implement such a programme, however, requires the working class to turn to a conscious international struggle for socialism.

This requires a political struggle against the PSOE-Podemos government. Since the beginning of the pandemic, Podemos has helped implement a rapid return to work of non-essential workers and the reopening of schools, all while maintaining a complicit silence on the government's failure to hire thousands of contact tracers and medical personnel needed to deal with a widely-expected resurgence of COVID-19.

While the regional affiliate of Podemos in Asturias filed the demand for the PSOE-controlled region to implement a shelter-at-home policy, this simply underscores the reactionary role of Podemos at the

national level. Pablo Iglesias—the general secretary of Podemos who is now Spain's deputy prime minister and a member of the oversight board of its National Intelligence Centre—has maintained a deafening silence on the pandemic. This is another example of “full loyalty” on all state questions Iglesias promised the PSOE when he went into government with it last year.

As for the trade union bureaucracy, they remained completely silent in the hopes that a share of the billions in bailout funds will pass into their union coffers. The larger trade unions—Workers Commissions (CC.OO, affiliated to Podemos) and the General Labour Union (UGT, affiliated to the PSOE)—who acted as the chief enforcers of back-to-work policy since spring, have not made any statements. The General Confederation of Labour (CGT), which at times postures as the alternative “radical” union has also remained silent.

The European sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International are calling on workers and youth to organise safety committees in workplaces and schools, independently of the unions. This would lay the basis for mass, coordinated strike actions, systematic opposition and the taking of power by the working class to impound the necessary resources for a scientific and humane fight against COVID-19 and put an end to the bourgeoisie's herd immunity policy.



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