

Switzerland in the coronavirus pandemic: “We are on the verge of a medical catastrophe”

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The worst coronavirus outbreaks have occurred in capitalist countries that ought to have the best means to combat the virus. This is something the *World Socialist Web Site* has repeatedly pointed out. It is an unanswerable indictment of capitalism—an indictment that also applies to relatively wealthy Switzerland.

The second wave of the pandemic has been accompanied by a deep crisis in that country’s health care system. Particularly in southern and western Switzerland, in the cantons of Geneva, Vaud, Valais, and neighbouring cantons, infections have skyrocketed over recent days. Intensive care units in the hospitals are full, and doctors and nurses on the verge of collapse.

On November 2, a chief doctor from Fribourg issued an urgent appeal via Twitter for the population to wear masks and follow contact restrictions. “This is the last chance to act,” stated Dr. Nicolas Blondel, in his calm but emphatic message. “COVID-19 is not the flu, and we are on the verge of a medical catastrophe. Switzerland has currently violated its duty of care.” Half of all coronavirus tests in Fribourg are coming back positive, an unprecedented positivity rate in Western Europe.

“Here in the hospital, the situation is extremely serious,” reported the doctor. “We currently have over 185 patients with COVID-19 in the hospital. Earlier the ambulances were arriving every 15 minutes. If it continues like this, we’ll run out of space.” The patients are not just elderly, over the age of 70, but “we also have many younger patients, including even some under 40. These patients are not doing well, and even now we can’t treat some of them the way we would like to.”

Blondel issued a warning against the coronavirus deniers, of which there are many in Switzerland in and around the right-wing Swiss People’s Party (SVP), and also issued a mild rebuke to the authorities and the media. He said, “We don’t know what to expect in the coming days. If the entire population changes its behaviour, perhaps there is still a chance, a last chance, for this to end differently than it did in Lombardy ... so now, stop, stop believing those who say that everything is OK. To be honest, I think the media is falling behind a bit, just like the authorities. This is the last moment to adopt measures.”

It is, in fact, high time for the working class to intervene into political affairs to stop the virus. Nothing can be expected from the politicians and the media because they are firmly under the thumb of the banks and business lobby organisations like Economiesuisse, which oppose lockdowns due to their impact on profits.

The *World Socialist Web Site* calls for the formation of rank-and-file safety committees in schools, workplaces, and on public transport in order to impose all necessary measures to contain the virus, including the shutdown of all non-essential production. “For a general strike! stop the second coronavirus wave in Europe!” was one of the slogans in a statement issued in late September by the European sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

The statement declared, “It is urgent to mobilize the working class in Europe and internationally in a general strike to halt the ongoing resurgence of COVID-19. After the premature lifting of lockdowns imposed this spring, the drive by European governments to fully reopen schools, workplaces and public gathering places has paved the way for a devastating resurgence of the

virus.”

The predicted catastrophe has now arrived. Globally, over 50 million cases and more than 1.25 million deaths have occurred, which means that 2.5 percent of those infected have died. Moreover, it is becoming ever clearer that the pandemic is not merely posing medical questions and challenges, but above all political ones. The bourgeois governments, including their “left” wing, have consciously and criminally neglected any effort to combat the pandemic.

Arch-capitalist Switzerland, which not only contains an unparalleled density of banks and billionaires, but also world-leading pharmaceutical firms and a well-developed health care system, has totally failed to combat the pandemic. During the first wave, Switzerland had the second fastest-growing increase in coronavirus cases in Europe at the end of March. The breathing space provided by the summer was allowed to pass without any action being taken. Now, there is not even a strict requirement to wear masks. “In terms of a lockdown, Switzerland is the second Sweden,” the German daily *Die Welt* laconically remarked.

As a result, incidence rates have risen dramatically. The Federal Health Agency (BAG), which registers all cases in Switzerland and Liechtenstein, reported on Tuesday morning close to 6,000 cases (5,980) over the preceding 24 hours. A further 107 patients lost their lives to COVID-19, while an additional 243 were taken to hospital. The 14-day incidence rate per 100,000 inhabitants is a staggering 4,771 infections, and 26.7 percent of all tests carried out during the same period came back positive.

Southern and western Switzerland, as noted, have been hardest hit. In Canton Valais, hospitals have had no free capacity for two weeks. In Geneva and Vaud, the Swiss army was brought in to help, as it was earlier this year. Over recent days, hospitals have flown patients able to travel by helicopter to hospitals in the German-speaking cantons, which still have capacity.

“We have no reserves,” complained Herve Zender, head doctor in the intensive care unit in a Neuchâtel hospital, according to Euronews. Providing an example, the doctor said, “This morning, I was asked to accept another patient, but I had no space for him. Therefore, I had to transfer the most stable patient in the unit to another hospital. That has become standard procedure for us now, we have no reserves.”

But what will happen when no other hospital has capacity? Infection numbers are also rising considerably in the German-speaking cantons.

According to the Canton Bern website, 16 people died in the canton on Monday alone, more than 8 percent of the 193 deaths recorded since March 2020. An additional 29 patients were taken to hospital, where 427 patients are currently being treated, including 62 in intensive care, 42 of whom have been intubated.

Reports from Argau are also alarming: the lack of medical personnel is so extreme that COVID-19-positive nurses who are symptom-free are being told to continue working.

As was the case over a century ago when the Spanish flu pandemic raged, the concept of “triage” is being publicly discussed once again. This refers to the decision when hospital beds run out as to who will receive medical treatment and who will be left to die. The “Guidelines for triage with a lack of resources in intensive care units” were updated and expanded to include a national coordinating office in Switzerland on November 4.

“The struggle for a free hospital bed has begun,” asserted a contribution by the national television and radio broadcaster SRF. While the Health Minister, Federal Councillor Alain Berset (Social Democrats, SP), insisted that non-essential operations in Zürich should be delayed, Zürich Canton government member and health director Natalie Rickli (SVP) responded that hospitals should not have to suffer financial losses as they did during the spring. Federal Councillor Berset had “lost sight of the financial aspect.” Delaying planned knee, hip, and cosmetic operations would be “disproportionate,” she added.



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