# As Europe's governments preside over mass death, workers must fight for the shutdown of nonessential production and schools

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Someone is dying every 17 seconds in Europe from the coronavirus. Daily COVID-19 fatalities are consistently over 4,000, with the World Health Organization reporting that over 29,000 people in Europe lost their lives during the week ending 15 November. If deaths continue at this terrible pace, and there is every reason to believe they will increase as health systems collapse, between 120,000 and 150,000 people will lose their lives every month in Europe alone.

The scale of death recorded in every major European country is staggering. France had a daily average of 500 deaths last week. In Italy, 731 people lost their lives on Tuesday, followed by another 753 on Wednesday. The death toll on the same days was 435 and 351 in Spain, and 598 and 529 in the UK. Even in Germany, long praised as a success story by the corporate-controlled media, 357 people died on Tuesday alone.

The continent has not witnessed mass death on this scale since the barbarism of World War II. As was the case during the first half of the 20th century, the ruling class of every European country has determined that the mass slaughter of hundreds of thousands and even millions of people is unavoidable and necessary to protect corporate profits. They bear political responsibility for what can only be described as a crime against humanity.

While European politicians contrasted their approach to COVID-19 with the catastrophic handling of the pandemic in the United States by the Trump administration during its early stages, all of the continent's governments are implementing a no less criminal and homicidal policy than the fascist-minded occupant of the White House. This is the policy of "herd immunity," which involves allowing the virus to run rampant through the population, regardless of the cost in human life, so that big business can continue to rake in profits and maintain lavish shareholder payouts to the super-rich.

The model for this continentwide strategy of mass murder is Sweden. From the outset of the pandemic, Swedish authorities decided to reject all national and regional lockdown measures in favour of allowing businesses to remain open. The result was one of the highest death rates in the world as the virus ripped through poorly equipped elderly care homes. Many elderly residents were left to die without being treated as overwhelmed hospitals in the Stockholm region refused to provide care to patients over the age of 80.

These horrendous conditions were the desired outcome of government policy, which was to reach "herd immunity" as quickly as possible. Justifying his decision to keep primary and lower-level secondary schools open, Swedish state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell wrote to his Finnish counterpart in mid-March, "One point might speak for keeping schools open in order to reach herd immunity more quickly."

Tegnell became the poster boy for the ruling elite's policy of guaranteeing corporate profits and death internationally. This was summed up in a May article in the *Foreign Affairs* journal with the programmatic title, "Sweden's coronavirus strategy will soon be the world's." It is of no consequence to these sociopaths that Tegnell's effort to reach "herd immunity" did not even come close. Sweden remains among the countries with the highest infection rates, and the death rate has shot up dramatically over the past two weeks, forcing its government to adopt restrictions on events and social gatherings.

As soon as the lockdown measures forced upon the ruling elite by wildcat strikes and working class protests in the spring were lifted, European governments of all political stripes set about sabotaging any concerted effort to contain the pandemic and ensuring that economic production and the flow of profit to the banks and financial oligarchy returned to normal. Over €2 trillion in bailout measures were forked over to the banks and major corporations by the European Union and its member states. This unprecedented transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top of society was fully endorsed by the trade unions, as was shown by the joint statement issued by French and German unions applauding the EU's massive handouts to banks and corporations.

Irrespective of their political affiliation, governments across the continent resolved at all costs to keep the economy running at full tilt and leave schools open to serve as a child-minding service so that parents were not removed from the labour force. From Germany's conservative-led Christian Democratic/Social Democratic coalition, to the French government of former

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investment banker Emmanuel Macron and the Spanish coalition between the social democratic PSOE and "left populist" Podemos, all of these political combinations oversaw the adoption of a "herd immunity" strategy that has led directly to the present catastrophe. State governments in Germany led by the Greens and Left Party have been no less ruthless in imposing the dictates of the corporations than Boris Johnson's hard-right Tory government in Britain, as shown by Thuringia Left Party Minister President Bodo Ramelow's praise for the "Swedish model."

As the corpses continue to pile up, the European ruling class has no intention of changing course. Macron has callously declared that everyone must learn to "live with the virus," an outrageous proposition given that a vaccine may be just months away.

The bitter opposition from the corporate and political elites to the closure of schools is playing a central role in spreading the virus. In Germany, infections among children rose tenfold between the beginning of October and the start of November. But when the country's 16 state minister presidents met with Chancellor Angela Merkel on Monday, they refused even to adopt a requirement that masks be made compulsory for teachers and students.

The minister president of the German state of Bavaria, Markus Söder, was recently caught on video bluntly expressing the ruling elite's determination to keep schools open, declaring, "Our children need to be cared for if we want to prevent an economic lockdown. That is the context: schools and day care centres also have the purpose of keeping the economy running."

Workers and young people are not prepared to risk their health and possibly die to secure the bottom lines of Deutsche Bank and BNP Paribas, corporations like Volkswagen and Airbus, and the vast wealth invested on the stock exchanges in London, Frankfurt and Paris.

Strikes erupted in French schools over recent weeks under conditions in which up to 35 students are crammed together in poorly ventilated rooms with no protection. These protests followed the occupation of hundreds of schools across Greece and demonstrations by students in Poland. Students at schools in the German cities of Worms and Essen have announced plans this week for school strikes to protest the dangerous conditions and call for safe education.

Growing numbers of workers and youth support the demand to shut down nonessential production and end in-person teaching to contain the virus. The struggle for a rational policy against COVID-19 is, however, not only a medical, but above all a political issue. The Socialist Equality Parties across Europe and the world have stressed that it requires building a movement in the European and international working class fighting for socialism.

The experience of the pandemic so far, including of the lockdowns in the spring, has shown the incompatibility of a scientific fight against COVID-19 with capitalism. Workers were left with miserly unemployment insurance payments or no income at all, youth with dysfunctional online learning programs, and small businesses and cultural and artistic venues that were shut down faced ruin. Workers in essential services—health care, logistics and food distribution—received haphazard supplies of protective equipment that were of uneven quality.

As trillions of euros are handed over to the super-rich, the claim that resources do not exist to fund crucial social needs is an absurd lie. These resources exist, but the political establishment has ferociously opposed making them available to the population and instead worked relentlessly to hand them over to the financial aristocracy. The only way to avert death on a truly horrific scale is to take up a struggle to expropriate these vitally needed resources as part of a struggle for socialism.

To carry out this fight, workers need their own independent organisations in opposition to the trade unions, which everywhere have helped enforce the back-to-work drive. Rank-and-file safety committees in every school and workplace, coordinating their struggles across national borders, are not only key to monitoring and stopping the spread of the virus, they can serve as the framework to organise a Europewide and international general strike to seize the resources needed for a scientific and humane response to the pandemic.

The precondition for such a response is the confiscation of the ill-gotten wealth of the super-rich and the transformation of the major corporations into publicly owned utilities controlled democratically by the working class. The protection of health and human life, not the obscene profits of capitalist oligarchs, must guide social decisions. This means a struggle to mobilise the working class throughout Europe and internationally to take political power, reorganise economic life along socialist lines, and establish the United Socialist States of Europe.

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