

Greece's hospitals face collapse in the second coronavirus wave

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The second wave of the pandemic has brought the Greek health care system, which has been bled dry for decades, to the brink of collapse. With death and infection figures skyrocketing, doctors and nurses are sounding the alarm.

Public-sector unions have called for a 24-hour strike for today because they fear the seething mood in the workforce will explode. On November 10, hospital workers organized small protests in Athens, Thessaloniki and other cities, and in October thousands of students went on strike and protested against the Greek government's criminal coronavirus policies.

With 1,815 deaths and over 95,000 infections among a population of 10.4 million inhabitants, this was the new high point of the pandemic in Greece on Tuesday evening. In November alone, almost twice as many people have already died from the virus than in the entire period from the beginning of the pandemic until October combined. On Saturday, the daily death toll reached a record 108, and 549 people are currently connected to respirators.

Greece was not as badly affected in the first phase of the pandemic as other countries, thanks to a quick and tough lockdown. But since the summer, the numbers have been shooting up because the government, under the right-wing Nea Dimokratia (ND, New Democracy), opened up the economy and schools prematurely and comprehensively.

Only in November was another partial lockdown imposed and schools and kindergartens closed. People are only allowed to leave the house for specified reasons, such as going to work or doctor's visits. Restaurants, cultural facilities and stores except supermarkets and pharmacies are closed. However, the measures do not include industry, wholesale outlets and hotels and, moreover, they came much too late. The virus was already raging in all parts of society.

According to the Ministry of Health on Friday, at least 82 percent of intensive care beds in Greece are occupied and hospitals will be unable to bear the burden of the new cases. They can only keep their heads above water at the moment because doctors and nursing staff are doing everything they can to make the impossible possible and to keep things going under the most adverse conditions.

The situation is particularly serious in northern Greece. "We are in a desperate state, the intensive care units are full," Nikos Kapravelos, head of the intensive care unit at the Papanikolaou Hospital in Thessaloniki, warned on the Skai television station. Special trains are standing by in Thessaloniki to transport coronavirus patients to other cities and even to Athens, 500 kilometres away.

Emergency physician Vasilis Tsapas reported to Mega TV that COVID-19 patients had to be ventilated in other rooms, although the conditions there are not as suitable as in the intensive care unit. No preparations had been made to strengthen the health system, Tsapas said.

The government's herd immunity policy is driving doctors into the deadly impasse of triage—selecting some patients for treatment and allowing others to die. A shocking case in the northern Greek city of Florina a few days ago shows what this means for people and their loved ones. In an interview with Mega TV, Kostas Ikonomidis described the last hours of his father, who succumbed to the coronavirus in only five days after his diagnosis because no respirator was available for him.

"The situation is tragic because we have reached a point where we have to decide who will live and who will die," said Ikonomidis. Doctors from the hospital in Florina "told us that there are no intensive care beds in northern Greece, they said, 'Believe me, even if a bed is found, for example in Thessaloniki or Larissa, they will not give it to your father, who is 73 years old, but choose someone younger who has a higher chance of survival'." Ikonomidis could only attend his father's funeral via video link. "I am devastated," he writes in a Facebook post.

In recent weeks, Greek prisons have also turned into breeding grounds for the virus. More than 100 positive cases and two deaths have been registered in the Diavata prison near Thessaloniki. There, as in other prisons, the virus can run free, because inmates cannot maintain a safe distance due to drastic overcrowding.

The situation is even worse in the overcrowded refugee camps and facilities, where coronavirus can spread like wildfire. On Samos, more than 100 people were infected in early November and were quarantined by being locked into tiny, dirty containers.

At the same time, infections are spreading among hospital staff. According to the state news channel ERT, 1,500 hospital staff were on sick leave because of COVID-19 on Sunday. One week ago, a 42-year-old pneumologist in Athens died of the virus after becoming infected by a patient. Just one day later, a 49-year-old woman died at the Achepa University Hospital in Thessaloniki, where she had worked in radiology.

Since October, the number of infections among children and young people has also increased dramatically. As reported by the television station Open TV, almost 6,000 infections among children under the age of 17 were recorded by November 20—six times as many as by the end of September.

Kostas Imprailos, a pathologist at the Ippokratio Hospital in Thessaloniki, told Open TV, "Recently, we have had many patients in their thirties among the sick." Meanwhile, "we see a very large proportion of them, perhaps 30 to 40 percent, who have no significant pre-existing conditions and yet develop very severe COVID."

On Monday, a 25-year-old from Serres lost the battle against the virus. Two days earlier, 39-year-old Athenian DJ Decibel (Dimitris Belos), who had previously been in perfect health, died. He leaves behind his wife, an infant and a new-born. The well-known musician was probably infected during a gig in October, a friend reports.

Treating some, letting others die

“Employees are desperate”

Faced with this shocking emergency, anger is seething in the working class and especially in the health care system. “The employees are desperate,” writes the Staff Council of the General Hospital of Chalkidiki in an open letter to the Health Minister published by the online newspaper *ThePressProject*. “You don’t go to war without soldiers and supplies.” They describe the difficult conditions for the overworked and understaffed personnel in the different departments. In response to their concerns that they “cannot work safely” in this way, their hospital director replied, “Those who cannot, should resign.”

In their letter, they are demanding the resignation of the director and the provision of immediate protective measures and an increase in staff by the local government and party representatives. “Where was the state when the pandemic was at a low level? Why was nothing organized in all this time, even though they knew that the second wave of the pandemic was coming in the fall? The situation is extremely critical!!! WE ARE ALONE!!!”

At an online event, pathologist Christina Kydona provided an insight into the work in a COVID-19 ward at Ippokratio Hospital in Thessaloniki, where instead of the planned 50 coronavirus patients, 300 now have to be treated. “I don’t even want to talk about the fatigue, exhaustion, the constant staff illness and the pervasive fear that prevails in the hospital... A specialist and an assistant doctor look after 50 patients and work 26 hours without a break in their protective overalls, with at least 30 percent being very severe cases.”

Moreover, Greek doctors and nurses live on low wages. According to *To Vima*, a doctor in the public sector (level “epimelitis B”) receives an average of €1,200 a month—around 40 percent less than ten years ago. The cost of living in Greece is only slightly lower than in Germany.

Last week, government spokesman Stelios Petsas announced a coronavirus bonus for various professions. When asked whether doctors would also be supported, he laughingly replied that this was not planned.

The situation is particularly precarious for assistant staff and doctors who do not have a permanent position. On Friday, assistant employees of the National Emergency Medical Service EKAV in Thessaloniki were informed that they will not be paid a salary in October and November.

Instead of pulling out all the stops to alleviate the health emergency and save lives, the ruling class is already planning to reopen schools as soon as possible and ramp-up the economy (most companies remained open anyway). There is speculation this could happen in mid-December, so as not to miss the Christmas trade. As in other European countries, the battle cry of the ruling class is “profits before lives.” Money is not being mobilized for the health and protection of the population, but mainly to benefit the banks and large corporations. On Tuesday, the government announced it will donate another €120 million in state aid to Aegean Airlines.

On Monday, referring to the pandemic, Development Minister Adonis Georgiadis tried to put a positive spin on the government’s catastrophic coronavirus policy. “We are 12 times better off than Belgium,” he claimed in a cynical calculation of the numbers of dead.

Privatization and armaments instead of fighting the pandemic

Amid this crisis, the right-wing ND under Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis is seizing the opportunity to push ahead with long-held privatisation plans in the health care system. Doctors have long called for the immediate requisition of all private hospitals in the fight against the

pandemic. On Friday, the Health Ministry declared that it had “requisitioned” two private hospitals in Thessaloniki. Previously, the government had negotiated for months with the owners of the private facilities, but they had refused to provide beds for COVID-19 patients because of the cost.

On closer inspection, the current alleged “seizure” of the private hospitals turns out to be another step by the government to strengthen the private sector at the expense of the public purse. On Monday, it came to light that workers from the understaffed public hospitals are being ordered to work in one of the “seized” private hospitals. Also, the private clinics receive a daily compensation payment—because “we are not in Soviet country,” as Health Minister Vasilis Kikilias commented sarcastically.

In a statement on Facebook, Dafni Katsimba, chairman of the Association of Hospital Doctors of Thessaloniki, spoke of a “disgrace.” He said this meant “the public sector was being seized by the private sector—instead of the other way around.”

The government’s deadly policy is to be continued at a fast pace next year. This is shown by the 2021 draft budget, currently being discussed in the parliamentary Economy Committee. According to media reports, the draft does not envisage a massive increase, but rather a cut in public health spending of €572 million. While €4.83 billion were earmarked this year for health—€523 million for combating the pandemic—next year, the figure is to be only €4.26 billion, with only €131 million of that for coronavirus measures. According to OECD figures, Greece is in next-to-last place in Europe in terms of additional health expenditure in the fight against COVID-19.

Instead, the government wants to pump even more money into the huge war machine. The defence budget is to increase by 30 percent from €3.8 billion this year to €5.4 billion next year.

These plans reveal that the tremendous bloodletting through the pandemic is not an inevitable stroke of fate, but the result of deliberate class politics supported by all capitalist parties. Before ND returned to government last year, the pseudo-left Syriza government under Alexis Tsipras had spent four years organizing a policy of social cutbacks, militarism and attacks on refugees, implementing it with the assistance of the unions against resistance in the working class. In the years before, the now completely discredited social-democratic PASOK had played the same role.



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