

Half a million dead in Europe from COVID-19 pandemic

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Today, Europe marks yet another grim milestone in the coronavirus pandemic. Half a million people have officially died of the virus across Europe, according to the figures published by Worldometers, which includes Russia in its European total.

The actual number of COVID-19 deaths is likely far higher. An October 14 study in the scientific journal *Nature*, examining excess deaths in 21 countries, found that the number of deaths above historical norms for January–June was around 20 percent higher than deaths officially attributed to COVID-19. If this is true for all of Europe, in fact there have been a further 100,000 deaths attributable to the pandemic.

The marker of 300,000 deaths was passed near November 10, the 400,000 marker at the end of November. The next 100,000 deaths came in three weeks. As with the previous milestones, it will be noted briefly, if at all, on television news programs. Above all, no European government is proposing a serious policy to urgently address the growing death toll and advance a scientific response. Any measure restricting production, corporate profits and the wealth of the European financial elite is rejected out of hand.

More than 3,000 people are dying each day. Britain recorded more than 37,000 cases and 691 deaths yesterday. Monday saw over 350 deaths in France and 415 in Italy. Yesterday, German health departments reported 19,528 new cases and 731 deaths to the Robert Koch Institute. This makes last week by far the worst yet in Germany, with 175,314 infections and over 4,300 deaths.

The virus is still spreading rapidly and is in fact accelerating. In December, France and the UK ended partial lockdowns, which had never closed non-essential production or schools, encouraging the population to travel for the holidays. In Britain, the

Johnson government announced that shopping centers would be open 24 hours a day, to ensure that retailers' most profitable period would not be impacted.

In France, the R rate is now above 1, meaning the virus is again growing exponentially. The Macron government ended lockdown measures on December 15 though case numbers never fell below 10,000—twice the threshold it claimed was necessary to allow for loosening restrictions. There are now 15,000 to 20,000 cases per day.

Christian Rabeau, the president of the medical commission at the Nancy Regional Hospital, said he anticipated a third wave beginning on January 4, when schools are due to reopen. “There could be 500 more patients in ICU compared to today,” he told Europe1 yesterday. Many hospitals are already approaching capacity. “This weekend, to be able to take in patients that arrived, we had to rearrange portions of the hospital to treat COVID,” he said.

In Britain, the virus is spiraling out of control, with more than 30,000 cases per day. Its spread is being accelerated by the emergence of a new strain, 70 percent more infectious, that now makes up more than 60 percent of cases in southeastern England. This strain has already been recorded in Italy, Spain and the Netherlands, Denmark, and beyond.

Scientific evaluations of the new strain estimate that it could increase the R rate by anywhere from 0.4 to 0.9. In an area with 10,000 daily cases, this would mean 4,000 to 9,000 new cases each day. It is unknown whether the new strain is more lethal, but a rapid growth in case numbers would more quickly overwhelm hospitals and thereby massively increase fatalities.

Scientists oppose the official policy of permitting tens of thousands of infections per day. On December 18,

the *Lancet* journal published a statement by medical scientists in Europe, entitled, “Calling for a pan-European commitment for rapid and sustained reduction in SARS-CoV-2 infections.”

Effectively indicting the current policy, the scientists declare that “low case numbers save lives,” and that “easing restrictions while accepting high case numbers is a short-sighted strategy that will lead to another wave.” They advise immediate lockdown measures until case numbers have been brought below no more than 10 cases per million people per day—approximately one thirtieth of the current levels in France.

The statement calls for a coordinated, continent-wide response, as “a single country alone cannot keep the number of COVID-19 cases low; joint action and common goals among countries are therefore essential.”

Governments, however, are racing to ensure business resumes as normal after the holidays. The Macron government insists that schools reopen on January 4. School are also being kept open in Britain and Germany. Governments are using schools as a child-minding service so parents can be forced to go to work, and are conscious that this will lead to tens of thousands more deaths.

The model everywhere, effectively, is Sweden, whose government openly pursued a policy of “herd immunity” that led to catastrophe. This was the deadliest November in Sweden since the Spanish flu in 1918. In a country of just 10 million people, it has recorded more than 8,000 deaths.

By contrast, Finland and Norway have seen 511 and 405 deaths, respectively, so that on a per capita basis, Sweden has more than eight times the death rate of its neighbors. Had such a policy been implemented at the level of Europe, the results would have been catastrophic.

Scientists are all warning of a new upsurge in the virus in early 2021. In every country, capitalist governments are deliberately putting profits before lives. After the initial lockdowns in the first half of 2020, they declared that no restrictions on production could be permitted again, regardless of the number of deaths. If the capitalist class is allowed to continue to dictate policy, the result will be a catastrophe that could easily eclipse what has already occurred.

The working class must intervene independently and

fight for a scientific response to the pandemic. The Socialist Equality Parties insist calling for the immediate closure of all schools and non-essential workplaces. Workers must be compensated in full for all lost time, with a decent living wage provided to every person throughout the lockdown. Small businesses must be fully compensated, and sufficient resources provided to them to ensure that all staff can be paid wages and that they can resume operations after the pandemic.

The fact that a vaccine is already being distributed and could save an untold number of lives within months makes it all the more imperative to ensure that the pandemic is brought under control immediately.

Claims that there is no money for such measures are patent lies. Trillions of euros have been handed out in bailouts to the major corporations and banks since the beginning of the year. When it is a matter of bailing out the rich, governments declare that no cost is too great. But when it is a matter of saving the lives of workers, there is nothing to be found.

The fight against the pandemic is therefore a fight against the diktat the capitalist class exercises over economic life. The Socialist Equality Party calls for the formation of independent rank-and-file committees in every workplace and school, to fight for a political general strike to demand a shutdown and halt the virus. The answer to the capitalist policy of death is the reorganization of economic and social life on the basis of socialism and genuine equality.

As is stressed by the *Lancet* medical scientists, such a policy cannot be pursued within a single country. The common policy of the capitalist class across Europe must be answered with a unified struggle of the entire working class across the continent, fighting for the United Socialist States of Europe.



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