

Irish health system on brink of collapse as COVID-19 figures surge

Dermot Quinn
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The Irish health system was on the brink of being overwhelmed last weekend by the upward spiral of admissions to Intensive Care Units (ICU).

On January 8, a record 8,248 COVID-19 infections and 20 deaths, were registered. Eight further deaths and 6,888 new cases were reported on Monday. In total, there have now been a staggering 135,884 infections and 2,237 people have died. In the last two weeks, more than 50,000 cases have been reported, accounting for 40 percent of all cases recorded since the outbreak of the pandemic last year.

Professor Philip Nolan of the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) warned last week, “The number in hospitals is now increasing exponentially, so we’re at the point now where our health services are under threat”.

The number of people with coronavirus in hospital has more than quadrupled in the last two weeks. Latest figures from the Irish Health Service Executive (HSE) put the number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 in hospital at 1,575, with 146 of these in ICUs. Of the 274 open and staffed ICU beds, 232 of these are occupied and only 40 available.

The head of the ICU at Mid-Western University Regional Hospital in Limerick, Dr Catherine Motherway, questioned last week whether the ICU's would be able to cope.

Speaking to the *Irish Mail* she said, “I don't know, nobody knows. We have a finite health resource, there are only a certain number of beds. We are hoping in some hospitals where possible to continue time-critical cases—i.e., cancers, high-risk vascular etcetera—where the patients can't wait.”

She warned, “In a surge scenario contingency standards of care replace normal standards of care, and outcomes may not be as good for patients.”

Enda O' Connor, ICU director at St James's Hospital in Dublin, issued a statement last weekend saying that the surge in ICU admissions could be “longer and more severe than the first wave last March due to the increase in cases, and it's possible we could see scenes here like they had in Italy during the first wave.”

Dr Anthony Staines, a leading expert on the coronavirus, stated last week that the projected August deadline for vaccinating most of the population could be extended to December this year due to the slow rollout of the vaccine. The rate at which the Irish state is currently vaccinating people against COVID-19 is nowhere near what is needed to give the population immunity before next year.

Research by the Our World in Data website which is linked to Oxford University showed that Ireland now has the highest daily number of new confirmed COVID-19 cases per capita in the world.

The state broadcasting service RTE reported on January 11 that Ireland's seven day rolling average is 1,394 cases per million, compared to the UK on 810, Portugal on 735, and the United States on 653.

The current Fine Gael/Fianna Fáil/Green Party coalition government presided over by Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Micheál Martin has played Russian roulette with the lives of working people at the behest of business interests and the super-rich. Its priority throughout the pandemic has been to keep the economy open for as long as possible, whatever the risks to the population, in line with the interests of US and European capital, and the dictates of the local ruling elite who support Martin's government as a broker for their class.

In early October 2020, Martin's government rejected a call from NPHE and other health experts for the immediate imposition of the highest grade Level 5

restrictions.

Two weeks later, October 19, they reversed course and imposed a six-week lockdown to suppress rising infection rates. Even with these new restrictions the government let construction sites remain open and refused to close schools. The restrictions had a downward impact on the number of infections, but these gains were squandered in late November when Martin's government opened the economy again under pressure from business.

As infections accelerated over the Christmas period to a thousand a day, Martin's coalition government imposed a third lockdown on December 30. This is planned to last till early March, with periodic reviews. Bars and restaurants have been shut down along with retail outlets. Travel between counties and home visits have been banned. Construction sites closed from January 8 for all but essential building projects.

Most schools are closed until the end of January, but secondary school pupils in preparation for their final exams will attend three days a week and roughly 15,000 pupils in special schools and classes remain in school full-time. Martin insisted, "All the scientific and public health evidence shows [schools] remain safe environments" and Minister for Education Norma Foley promised "we are looking at the review [of the school closure policy] at the end of January."

The effect of the pandemic is exacerbated by Ireland's social and economic crisis. Growing social inequality and the worst housing crisis in the country's history, as well as a severe deterioration in the health care system, have left the Ireland woefully unprepared for the latest surge in COVID-19 infections.

Between 2008 and 2014, successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael governments carried out massive health spending cuts worth €2.7 billion, which left the health service understaffed and with reduced bed capacity.

A decade of attacks on the living standards of the working class has left swathes of society extremely vulnerable. By the end of last month there were almost 529,300 people on the live unemployment register or claiming the pandemic unemployment payment. The housing and homeless crisis has accelerated. Data from the Central Statistics Office which was published by the Saint Vincent De Paul charity showed recently that there were more than 140,000 children living in homes that are cold and damp, with 12.3 percent of Irish

children living in fuel poverty.

While living standards plummet amid the health and social emergency, the coalition government has looked after its financial backers and friends. Over €4.5 billion have been handed to employers since the pandemic began through the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme. Under the current lockdown introduced at the beginning of this month, a double payment of the Covid Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS) was made to businesses, up to a maximum of €5,000 a week. Businesses affected will also be eligible commercial rates relief for the first three months of 2021.

Since the pandemic began almost a year ago, the Socialist Equality Group in Ireland and the International Committee of the Fourth International have insisted that the inability of the crisis-ridden capitalist system to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic is rooted in the growth of social inequality and the exploitative nature of the capitalist system, which puts profit before life and the basic needs of working people.

Only an international movement of the working class can fight for the fully-funded health service, and effective lockdowns with full income and educational support necessary to save lives—paid for by seizing the ill-gotten wealth of big business and the super-rich. This is the fight against capitalism and for socialism.



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