

Spanish hospitals on brink of collapse as COVID-19 cases explode

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17 January 2021

Coronavirus cases in Spain have continued to rocket upwards, as the country registered its highest-ever number of daily cases on Friday: 40,197 infections in a single day.

This exceeded a record set only two days earlier, on Wednesday, of 38,869 new cases. Thursday also saw exceptionally high figures, with 35,878 infections recorded in the official government count. Prior to the explosion of cases last week, the highest-ever number of daily infections had been recorded on October 30, with 25,592 new positive tests. As of Friday, a total of 2,252,164 coronavirus infections had been detected in Spain and 53,314 deaths.

This is despite a significant drop in the number of tests being conducted. In the week ending January 8, only 804,158 coronavirus tests were carried out, compared to well over a million tests (1,205,303) in the week ending November 5—at the height of infections in the autumn.

Amid this surge in the pandemic doctors and other medical professionals are warning that hospitals are on the brink of collapse as admissions to intensive care units rise rapidly. Within a couple of days, hospital occupancy will exceed the worst figures recorded during the height of the pandemic in November last year, if the current trend continues.

Since Christmas, hospitalisations for COVID-19 have increased by around 70 percent and intensive care unit (ICU) occupation rates have gone up by nearly 50 percent.

Medical facilities are being forced to ration care and postpone routine activities to cope with the demands placed on them by the surge in coronavirus cases. “Many hospitals are delaying part of their non-covid activity, especially surgery that requires an ICU in the postoperative period,” explained Ricard Ferrer,

president of the Spanish Society of Intensive, Critical and Coronary Unit Medical Care.

Hospitals in the region of Valencia have been forced to suspend routine operations and non-urgent diagnostic tests in order to respond to the new surge in coronavirus admissions. The regional government has also called for 280 more beds to be made available in field hospitals. In Catalonia and Galicia, hospitals are also warning that they may soon be overwhelmed and are beginning to cancel scheduled operations.

“The forecasts are very bad and the gradient of the epidemiological curve is becoming almost vertical. If we continue this way,” warned Javier García Fernández, president of the Spanish Anaesthesiology Society, “hospitals will start to collapse within two weeks.”

Spanish hospitals now have around 800 more patients in critical condition than a month ago. In many regions, over 40 percent of all patients in ICUs had been admitted for COVID-19: the Balearic Islands (41.04 percent), Catalonia (42.38), La Rioja (45 percent) and Valencia (48.09 percent).

There are currently nearly 20,000 patients hospitalised with COVID-19 in Spain, with around 3,000 in intensive care. This is approaching the highest hospital admission figures of the second wave, which peaked at 21,051 hospitalised patients on November 11 and 3,156 intensive care patients on November 16.

Madrid’s Society of Intensive Medicine stated that the occupancy of its ICU beds was standing at 90 percent, if taking the number of available beds prior to the onset of the pandemic as a reference point. The Society pleaded for “urgent and drastic measures” to control the spread of the contagion and “dampen the rising curve of admissions.”

The accumulated incidence rate has also exploded

over the last week, having risen by over 200 points in only seven days. As of last Friday, the incidence per 100,000 people stood at 575.1 across Spain, compared to 350.48 only a week before.

The region of Extremadura continues to be the worst affected, with the incidence rate rising from 803 per 100,000 to a staggering 1,090.30 in a week. Five other regions are reporting rates of over 600 per 100,000: Murcia (739.40), Valencia (727.80), Castilla-La Mancha (725.00), the Balearic Islands (644.60) and Madrid (632.70).

Even this is a significant underestimate. Many cases are still going undetected, as indicated by the rising positive test rate across the whole country. Across Spain, around 17 percent of tests are returning a positive result, well above the threshold of 5 percent that the World Health Organisation considers to be a sign that the pandemic is under control. In Castilla-La Mancha and Valencia, a massive 30 percent of tests are coming back positive.

This explosion of cases is devastating health care workers, who report intolerable stress and anxiety. According to two studies by the Hospital del Mar Medical Research Institute, nearly half (45 percent) of medical workers are at high risk of suffering a mental health disorder as a result of their work in the first wave of the pandemic. Around 14 percent were suffering from a debilitating mental health condition, with clear negative consequences on their professional and personal lives, and 3.5 percent had had suicidal thoughts—more than double the rate in the population as a whole.

The study also showed that nearly one in three health care workers (28.1 percent) were suffering from depression; 22.5 percent from anxiety; around one in four from panic attacks; 22.2 percent from post-traumatic stress and just over 6 percent from substance abuse issues.

In the face of this looming catastrophe the Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government is refusing to take any action to bring the contagion under control. Instead, top health officials are blaming the population for the increased spread of the virus, berating them for supposedly having partied or gathered in large groups over the holidays.

“Everyone was aware what was recommended at Christmas, [and] I’m sorry to say, perhaps we had a

better time than we should have done,” declared Fernando Simón, director of the Centre for the Coordination of Health Alerts and Emergencies. The spread of the pandemic is now “clearly rising and it is a consequence of the behaviour over the last days,” he added.

This is a cynical and politically criminal attempt to divert responsibility for the consequences of the bourgeoisie’s “save Christmas” campaign. Regional and national governments outright refused measures to contain the virus in the weeks before Christmas, encouraging workers to go out shopping to ensure businesses got their profits.

This was made most explicit by right-wing regional premier of Madrid, Isabel Díaz Ayuso, who declared in the middle of December, as cases were already rapidly rising: “We’re not planning on bankrupting businesses, closing hospitality or affecting the economy. We will not be the ones to prevent citizens from going in or out of Madrid to visit their families.”

The behaviour of representatives of the ruling class such as Ayuso is indeed now having its consequences.

Despite the explosion in cases, the PSOE-Podemos government is doubling down on its refusal to act to contain the pandemic. In a press conference on Thursday, Simón declared: “The option of a [stay-at-home] lockdown, as always, is there. But at the moment it does not seem necessary.”

On Saturday, Health Minister Salvador Illa echoed these comments, stating: “We are not contemplating any stay-at-home lockdown. ... We have the knowledge and the experience; we know how to bend the curve.”

The working class cannot place any trust in these corrupt representatives of big business, whose sole concern is to keep profits flowing into the coffers of the financial elite—no matter the cost in human lives. Only an independent political struggle of workers in Spain and internationally will provide the means for an effective struggle against the escalating COVID-19 pandemic and to safeguard lives.



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