

Portugal records worst rate of Covid-19 cases in the world

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The people of Portugal are suffering the terrible fate of leading the world in terms of new coronavirus infections and deaths.

Around 15,000 new infections and 250 deaths per 1 million inhabitants occurred last month, compared to the European Union (EU) average of 4,200 and 103. A record 16,432 new cases and 303 deaths from the virus were reported on January 28.

In the month of January alone, nearly half of the 726,321 infections and 12,757 deaths since the start of the pandemic were reported.

Hospitals across the country of just over 10 million people are reportedly on the verge of collapse, with ambulances queuing for hours due to the lack of beds. The Garcia de Horta Hospital in Almada is operating at more than 300 percent of its capacity. Socialist Party (PS) Health Minister Marta Temido admitted, “We are putting all means to work in all sectors, but there is a limit. And we are very close to the limit.”

Last Friday, Portugal’s air force flew three critically ill COVID-19 patients from Lisbon to the island of Madeira, where there are spare hospital beds. On Sunday, Austria agreed to take Portuguese intensive-care patients and Germany agreed to airlift military medics, paramedics and equipment. International flights have been curtailed and Portugal's sole land border with Spain closed.

The newly re-elected conservative President of the Republic, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, warned that the lockdown announced in mid-January in response to the surge in infections and deaths would probably last until the end of March and possibly into the summer.

PS Prime Minister, António Costa, told reporters that the situation was not just “bad” but “terrible”: “There’s no point in feeding the illusion that we are not facing the worst moment. And we’ll face this worst moment for a few more weeks, that is for sure.”

Costa said the reason for the surge in infections was his

government's relaxation of restrictive measures at Christmas and the appearance of a more infectious COVID-19 variant first detected in Britain. In a de facto warning to the working class throughout Europe, experts estimate the British variant accounts for up to 40 percent of all new cases. There has also been an increase in a new variant from Brazil, a former colony, the people of which still have close connections with Portugal.

But Costa sought to shift his government's responsibility for continuing the chronic underfunding of Portugal's public health system (SNS), saying it was down to his confusing “messages”.

“There were certainly errors: often the way I transmitted the message to the Portuguese... and, when the recipient of the message did not understand the message, then it is the messenger’s fault, I have no doubt about it,” he said.

Last year, the country avoided the worst of the devastation caused by COVID-19, largely due to the Portuguese population abiding by restrictive measures including social distancing, the wearing of masks and limiting travel. According to Alexandre Lourenço, the president of the Portuguese Association of Hospital Administrators, Portugal also got through the first wave last year by delaying 120,000 operations and more than 10 million appointments, most of which have still not been carried out.

However, as was the case internationally, in the pursuit of a murderous herd immunity policy pressure mounted from big business, especially from the tourism sector which represents 20 percent of Portugal's GDP, to reopen the economy.

The PS duly obliged. It rejected the closure of schools and non-essential production, and refused to pay full wages to quarantined workers, to prevent the transmission of the virus. This was because such policies would impact on the profits of major corporations. Its priority was the protection of corporate profits, not lives.

Schools started and normal working resumed in the autumn. Inevitably, infections began to increase. By November there was a new state of emergency and new restrictive measures in place, including a 1pm weekend curfew.

However, claiming that infections were declining in early December, the government announced that it would “save Christmas.” For three days, Portuguese citizens were allowed to travel freely across the country, curfews were relaxed and family gatherings allowed. Many Portuguese workers living in the UK and British expats entered the country without having to present a negative Covid test or be tested at Portuguese airports.

As COVID-19 surged, the PS government was forced to announce another lockdown in its ninth state of emergency on January 15. Even then it was sold as a “softer” version allowing schools, churches and 52 types of businesses to continue operating. With the pandemic continuing to spike and public anger mounting, schools were told to close on January 22. But by then the damage was done.

As Algarve regional health official, Ana Cristina Guerreiro, explained, “Since the beginning of the school season, many cases have arisen, which came from family transmission. And the epidemiological investigation caused many of the classes to go home in preventative isolation. This caused, in the whole country, a very large number of cases at home and a high number of cases that had not existed before; such a large number of school children with a positive test.”

The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) has singled out Portugal as “lagging behind” in the rolling out of vaccines, exacerbated by the European Union’s (EU) vaccine distribution debacle. By the end of January just 70,000 people had been fully vaccinated with two doses and it was only this Monday that those over 80 start getting their shots.

Portugal is one of the countries that has made the least extra expenditure on health during the pandemic. According to the report “Health at a Glance Europe 2020”, which measures expenditure on specialized medical equipment, personal protective equipment (PPE), track and testing capacity, hiring of additional workers, support for hospitals and the development of vaccines, Portugal spent 57 euros per person—half the EU average of 112 euros.

The COVID-19 disaster facing Portugal is a result of more systemic reasons. The public health sector has been under constant attack since the global banking crisis of

2008 under the dictates of the “troika” financial institutions. A prime objective of governments has been compliance with EU imposed austerity programmes. In its five years in power, Costa's PS administration produced an unprecedented 0.3 percent budget surplus.

As a result, Portugal continues to suffer from one of the smallest hospital capacities per capita in the EU. There are just 4.2 critical care beds per 100,000 people, the lowest in the EU, compared to Spain (over nine such beds per 100,000) and Germany (nearly 30). Promises to implement a National Health Plan and hire more health professionals have failed to materialise.

Swathes of public health services have been privatised. The PS government has refused to invoke powers under the State of Emergency to requisition services from the private health companies, which refused to receive COVID-19 patients in the first wave. Their “help” now is limited to contracting just 80 beds for COVID-19 patients and 800 for non-COVID-19 patients.

At the same time as the National Health Service (SNS) is at the point of collapse, the PS government is pressing ahead with its plans to inject up to €474 million for Novo Banco, the so-called “good bank” rescued from the collapse of Banco Espirito Santo in 2014 and now owned by the US Lone Star vulture fund. Over €4 billion has already been pumped into Novo Bank. This is part of the 18 billion euros used to prop up the financial system over the last decade, even prompting right-wing president, de Sousa, to confess, “It's tempting to say 'why didn't it go to housing, why didn't it go to health, why didn't it go to social security, why did it not go to the homeless?’”



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