

800,000 COVID-19 deaths in Europe: capitalism, social murder and the case for socialism

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Yesterday, the official death toll from the coronavirus pandemic across Europe surpassed 800,000.

Death on this scale is so massive a blow to society that it is difficult to comprehend. It is as if the cities of Frankfurt (753,056) or Amsterdam (821,752) had been wiped off the map. The loss of life has surpassed the total casualties at the battle of Verdun in World War I, and the number of soldiers killed in the gigantic 1941 battle of Moscow during the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union.

One in 529 people has died of COVID-19 in Belgium, one in 545 in the Czech Republic, one in 558 in Britain, one in 625 in Italy, one in 630 in Portugal, and one in 646 in Bosnia. As deaths surge and births collapse, life expectancy has fallen in Western Europe for the first time since World War II: 1.5 years in Italy, one year in Spain and Britain, and half a year in Sweden and France.

Tens of millions in Europe have lost loved ones. By last month, 63 percent of Spaniards, 59 percent of Poles, 58 percent of Italians, 57 percent of Britons and Swedes, 51 percent of Frenchmen and 34 percent of Germans had at least one relative or close friend test positive. Fully 19 percent in Spain and Poland, 21 percent in Italy, 13 percent in Britain, 11 percent in France, 10 percent in Sweden and 8 percent in Germany, saw a relative or close friend die.

Tens of millions of workers lost their jobs as the economy fell by 11 percent in Spain, 10 percent in Britain, 9 percent in Italy, 8 percent in France, 5 percent in Germany, and 3 percent in Poland and Russia. Restaurants, theaters, gyms and other small businesses are unsure when or even if they will ever be able to reopen normally. Students who have lost part-time jobs are lining up to receive food and basic supplies from charities or other associations.

The pandemic is not only a tragedy, but a comprehensive failure of the social order. A ruling class utterly indifferent to human life is carrying out policies that amount, as the prestigious *BMJ* (*British Medical Journal*) recently wrote, to “social murder.”

Today, the total number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 stands at 33.5 million, or about 5 percent of Europe’s

population. Every day, 100,000 people or more test positive, and deadlier variants of the virus spread further. The Czech Republic recently appealed for international aid, with its hospitals overwhelmed, and expected to be swamped in two to three weeks. It received only one reply, from Berlin, offering to take just nine patients.

Yet amid warnings from scientists that a new upsurge of cases due to the variants is inevitable unless drastic action is taken, capitalist governments across Europe are rejecting shelter-at-home orders and moving to eliminate remaining social distancing measures.

UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson set the tone on February 21 when he announced a “road map” for an “irreversible” lifting of Britain’s “last lock-down.” In this plan, London will not try to control the exponential growth rate of the virus unless conditions “risk a surge in hospital admissions.” Johnson baldly ordered British workers to “accept that there will be more infections, more hospitalizations and therefore, sadly, more deaths” beyond the 126,000 already recorded.

Berlin began reopening schools across Germany on Monday, and Spanish regional governments are loosening social distancing restrictions. French President Emmanuel Macron shocked the public last month by rejecting a widely expected nationwide lockdown order recommended by scientists. While two-thirds of Frenchmen expected such a lockdown, Macron lectured officials at a National Security Council meeting: “I’ve had enough of scientists who answer my questions about the variants with just one scenario: a new lockdown.”

With vaccine rollouts hopelessly delayed, vaccination will not halt a wave of new deaths in the coming months if such policies are pursued. The percentage of the population that has had just one of the two doses of a vaccine ranges from 24 percent in Britain and 13.5 percent in Serbia to 4 percent in Poland, 3 percent in Germany, France, Spain and Italy, 2.8 percent in the Czech Republic and 1.4 percent in Russia.

Mass spread of the virus is not inevitable. By following medical professionals’ calls for strict contact tracing and shelter-at-home orders, a few countries like China, Taiwan and Vietnam dramatically limited the contagion. In Europe,

however, political representatives of the financial aristocracy needlessly condemned hundreds of thousands to death.

The fight against the pandemic requires the political mobilization of the working class against capitalism, which subordinates human life to private profit and to the reactionary national geopolitical interests of the imperialist powers.

Initial lockdowns imposed across much of Europe in the spring of 2020 were adopted due to a wave of wildcat strikes across Italy that spread to other countries, including Spain, France and Britain. “In every industrial sector... there is an extremely brutal shift in workers’ attitudes,” Patrick Martin, the vice president of France’s main business federation, the Medef, wrote at the time. Blaming workers for an “overreaction” to COVID-19, Martin warned that management “can no longer continue production due to pressure from the workers.”

While the working class mobilized to defend life, European capitalist officials and the media worked to defend profits and death. They called for an end to lockdowns and the continuation of non-essential production, thus keeping profits flowing to the banks. Laying out Europe’s “herd immunity” strategy, UK Chief Scientific Advisor Patrick Vallance said it’s “not desirable” to stop the spread of COVID-19, calling for “some immunity in the population to protect ourselves in the future.”

In Germany, where a classified Interior Ministry memo released last summer estimated that letting COVID-19 spread would lead to over 1 million deaths, President Wolfgang Schäuble denounced the view that “everything must take second place to the protection of life.” Germany’s Constitution, he bluntly declared, “does not exclude us from having to die.”

As they ended last year’s initial lockdown, European officials designed multi-trillion-euro bailouts, forking over vast levels of public wealth to the financial aristocracy. Bank bailouts of €1.25 trillion from the European Central Bank and £645 billion from the Bank of England, and corporate bailouts of €750 billion by the EU and £330 billion in Britain, sent stock markets skyrocketing. Europe’s richest individual, French billionaire Bernard Arnault, saw his fortune rise by €30 billion.

The greed of the financial aristocracy was indistinguishable from the imperialist powers’ struggle to dominate world markets. Warning of the risk of “China-centric globalization,” *Le Monde* endorsed Trump’s “herd immunity” policy as “the ‘business first’ option, sacrificing part of its population to not leave Chinese power with an open field.” The EU thereupon also sacrificed its population.

German and French unions signed the EU bailout, as the affluent middle-class forces in the union bureaucracies and pseudo-left parties saw their stock portfolios surge. The “left populist” Podemos party implemented “herd immunity” policies from within the Spanish government.

All these organizations supported the ruling class’s universal

back-to-work and back-to-school policy. Since last summer, they kept workers going to work and most youth going to school, even when governments reintroduced bogus “lockdowns” as COVID-19 cases began to explode in November. They took their watchword from Macron’s statement in September: “We must learn to live with the virus.”

The consequences are now plain to see. European health systems, stripped bare by decades of austerity since the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, proved incapable of tracing, isolating and containing the virus even after last spring’s lockdowns initially brought COVID-19 cases down to only a few thousand per day.

Fixated on defending their wealth and indifferent to mass death, the ruling classes of the major European countries have intensified their fascistic policies. Officers in Spain, outraged by strikes in March calling for the closure of non-essential factories, declared their loyalty to fascism and their plans for a coup to shoot “26 million” people. Macron’s Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin, a former member of the far-right *Action française*, introduced laws to ban filming of police and regulate Islam, setting the stage for intensified police repression of protests and appeals to anti-Muslim hatred.

Working class opposition is again rising across Europe. Recent months have seen strikes by Italian public sector workers, wildcat strikes by French teachers against in-person teaching, industrial action at plants in Spain and beyond threatened with closure, and a growing radicalization of youth and students against police state measures. To wage this fight, however, political conclusions must be drawn.

The pandemic marks a historic turning point. European capitalism is discredited—its ruling elites, its corporatist union bureaucracies that function as tools of the state, and its pseudo-left parties. Fighting the pandemic requires building a socialist movement in the international working class, independent of the unions and established parties. Only this can prepare the transfer of state power to the workers to wage an international, scientifically-based struggle against the global COVID-19 pandemic.



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