

Podemos supports ending social distancing amid “fourth wave” in Spain

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The Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government has announced that it will end the state of alarm on May 9. The state of alarm is the juridical mechanism regional governments use to impose obligatory social distancing measures, such as lockdowns, curfews, limitations on gatherings and mobility restrictions.

Once presented as being less effective than nationwide lockdowns but more compatible with keeping workers on the job, the state of alarm is being ended as a signal that the ruling class seeks to lift any measures limiting the extraction of profits. This ending of social distancing will only accelerate the spread of the virus, provoking countless unnecessary deaths.

Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez defended this policy, cynically claiming Spain would vaccinate 33 million people, or 70 percent of the adult population, by late August, even though it has missed all its previous vaccination targets. He then claimed ludicrously that “We are facing the beginning of the end of the pandemic. ... Spain already has an exit horizon.”

“Vaccination is the most efficient economic policy,” he insisted, underscoring the capitalist interests underlying the “herd immunity” policy.

Spain is ending social distancing policies as Europe enters a new wave of the pandemic. The country regularly records around 10,000 infections and dozens or hundreds of deaths each day. Press reports calculate that the new wave could lead at the very least to several hundred thousand new infections, on top of the 3.3 million recorded to date. This means tens of thousands more could die, beyond the more than 100,000 excess deaths recorded by Spain’s National Institute of Statistics.

Not one significant comment has been posted questioning why Spain is eliminating social distancing as a new wave begins. Death on this scale has not been seen since on the Iberian Peninsula since the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), which led to around 500,000 deaths. Nevertheless, all the liberal or pro-Podemos media, from *El País* to *elDiario.es*, *Público*, *La Marea*, and *Infolibre* have accepted this policy as an accomplished fact. Such staggering indifference to human life confirms the British Medical Journal’s characterization of ruling elites’ pandemic policy as “social murder.”

The responsibility for this “social murder” lies above all on

the “left populist” Podemos party. Having promised radical change and an end to austerity, it has become the PSOE’s chief co-conspirator in the ruling elite’s pandemic policy. Podemos is reacting to the ending of social distancing measures by saying nothing. As always, silence denotes consent.

This is a warning about similar parties and politicians internationally, such as Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of the Democratic Socialists of America, Jean-Luc Mélenchon of La France Insoumise, Janine Wissler of Die Linke in Germany and Syriza in Greece. Drawn from the affluent middle class and similarly based on the identity politics of race and gender, these parties adopt the same murderous policies as their right-wing counterparts in the political establishment.

Podemos’ only comment about the “fourth wave” came from its regional branch in Andalusia. Its spokesperson, Susana Serrano, accused the regional right-wing Popular Party (PP) government last week of “total immobility” in the face of the “fourth wave.” She called on the PP to continue with the “nightly curfew.” However, after May 9, this policy—itsself ineffective in guaranteeing social distancing—will soon be impossible to carry out, as her own party will have lifted the state of alarm.

Like Sánchez, Serrano called for accelerating vaccinations as the only possible solution. She called for “hitting the accelerator with respect to vaccination,” which is “what is going to stop the spread of the virus.” In the absence of closing nonessential work and a subsidised shelter-at-home policy, however, this condemns countless thousands more to die as they wait for vaccinations.

Serrano ended her press conference claiming that Podemos “avoids the false dichotomy between health or economy.” This is a political lie. Podemos has implemented the official policy of prioritising capitalist profits over human life throughout the pandemic. Its leader, Pablo Iglesias has routinely been tasked with falsely presenting his government’s pandemic policy as being based on science.

Last May, Iglesias said that while the government had done some things “badly,” “we have also done good things, like listening to specialists and epidemiologists.”

This was part of the victory speeches last May and June,

which culminated in Prime Minister Sánchez's now-infamous statement: "We have defeated the virus." At that time, excess deaths due to the pandemic stood at 48,000, well less than half the total today.

Underlying these cynical statements was a clear strategy to force millions back to work and school and lift confinement measures. This led to thousands more deaths in a second wave. By the end of the year, 22,000 more people died, raising the excess death toll to 70,000. It exposed the lie that the PSOE-Podemos government's policy was based on science.

Ahead of the third wave, Iglesias declared in mid-December as the first vaccines started to roll out, "Thank you to science and the health workers. We are seeing the end of the tunnel. Thanks a lot all of you who have given everything to our citizens." Sánchez also declared, "With the arrival of the vaccine, I insist, the beginning of the end is near."

Once again, the underlying motive was to lift social distancing measures to boost Christmas profits. A third wave was then presented as inevitable. State epidemiologist Fernando Simón publicly admitted in mid-December, "It is very likely that we will maintain an upward trend, if the forecasts are what we are seeing, until the middle or end of January." Nonetheless, the government lifted social distancing for the holidays. By the end of the third wave in February, Spain accumulated a death toll of over 100,000 excess deaths and 3.2 million infections.

Now, as Spain enters its "fourth wave," Iglesias is remaining silent. So has his colleague Yolanda Díaz, Podemos' new deputy prime minister and labour minister, groomed to become Iglesias' successor.

Díaz has played a key role, working with the unions to implement herd immunity policies. With the Workers Commissions (CCOO) and General Union of Labour (UGT) unions, Díaz forced millions of workers back to nonessential work. They did this even as unions recognised that most companies "are not in a position to guarantee these health and safety conditions," as CCOO leader Unai Sordo declared in April 2020. This led to disaster. According to conservative estimates, at least 25 percent of COVID-19 outbreaks in Spain originated in workplaces.

CCOO and UGT have also claimed that schools are safe environments, suppressing teachers' and students' anger against school reopenings. Schools have now become one of the main sources of the spread of the virus, surpassing for the first time other environments, such as social or family gatherings, nursing homes, health care centers or workplaces.

This means that tens of thousands of deaths and infections provoked by the back-to-work and back-to-school orders are directly attributable to Podemos and the trade unions.

As Spain enters the "fourth wave," moreover, the CCOO and UGT have made clear they will not call for any measures to limit the spread of the virus. CCOO posted a statement on March 29, titled "CCOO asks to not repeat the mistakes of Christmas period to avoid a 'fourth wave'." Analysing data, it

said that "confirmed cases, hospitalizations, ICU admissions and deaths nationwide doubled in the period between December 2, 2020 and February 24, 2021." Nevertheless, CCOO did not propose or call for any concrete actions.

Similarly, UGT has absurdly called for avoiding a "fourth wave" last week, by which point it was clear that this wave is already under way. The unions' major concern, however, is not workers' lives but the possibility that new restrictions would affect the accumulation of profits.

UGT Secretary of Social Policies, Work and Social Security Mari Carmen Barrera said, "It is essential to avoid a fourth wave of contagion that would produce new work stoppages and put more stress on the economy and employment. This is key to ensuring the summer [tourist] season. For this reason, it is necessary to continue the restrictive measures until collective immunity is achieved, in the same way it is necessary to accelerate and strengthen the vaccination campaign because together with prevention measures, they are essential to recover the [economic] activity."

The following day Sánchez announced the ending of the state of alarm. UGT did not follow up on its initial, symbolic call for limited "restrictive measures." Instead, it has remained silent.

Workers and youth must assimilate the bitter lessons of this past year. The PSOE-Podemos government and the trade unions cannot be "pressured" to carry out a more humane pandemic policy. Their sole concern is to keep profits flowing into the coffers of the financial elite, regardless of the cost in human lives. Only an international political struggle by the working class, organized independently from the pro-capitalist unions and on a socialist program opposed to pseudo-left parties like Podemos, will be able to impose effective measures to bring the COVID-19 pandemic under control.



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