WHO reports 1 million coronavirus deaths in Europe as cases surge

Will Morrow
15 April 2021

The World Health Organization (WHO) announced yesterday that the official number of coronavirus deaths in Europe surpassed 1 million last week. Even as the appalling death toll was announced, the virus continues to surge rapidly across the continent, fuelled by the more contagious B.1.1.7 variant, and threatening to overwhelm already strained hospital systems.

WHO European regional director Dr Hans Henri P. Kluge announced the 1 million total in a press conference yesterday. "The situation in our region is serious," he stated. "1.6 million new cases are reported every week. That's 9,500 every hour, 160 people every minute." The official toll is, itself, a significant underestimation of the actual number of people who have died from the virus.

"It is only among the oldest, that we are seeing declining incidence," said Kluge. "Over the past two months, the trend among people more than 80 years of age, has diverged from the trend seen in every other age group, possibly thanks to high vaccination uptake in this high-risk group. Since February, the proportion of COVID-19 deaths in Europe, among those older than 80, has gradually fallen to close to 30 percent, the lowest level since the beginning of the pandemic. Hospitalization, nonetheless, remains at high levels, with continued reports of intensive care capacity having been exceeded."

In a number of Eastern European countries, deaths are accelerating rapidly. In Poland, more than 90 percent of all new cases are now the B.1.1.7 variant, commonly referred to as the UK variant, which is more contagious and more deadly than the original strain. It has fuelled a surge in cases that has pushed the hospital system to the brink. On April 1 infections reached their highest level since the beginning of the pandemic.

More than 803 people were reported dead in Poland yesterday. The day before, another 645 people died. The seven-day daily average of deaths is now over 600, equivalent to approximately 5,300 daily deaths in a country with the population of the United States.

The hospital system is already overwhelmed. Michal Drozdz, a Warsaw paramedic, told the *Financial Times* that he is routinely forced to spend hours queuing up outside hospitals, because there is no more available place to take patients. "This has been happening all the time for three weeks. Every shift there's a real threat you'll have to spend it waiting in front of a hospital," he said. "Sometimes it's two hours, sometimes six. … During that time you can't help anyone, which is what this job should be about."

In November last year, 5,000 people had died from the coronavirus in Poland. This has since risen more than 12-fold to almost 60,000. In February, even as the more contagious variant was circulating, the right-wing government of Mateusz Morawiecki announced a further relaxation of lockdown measures, including the reopening of schools for younger primary-aged students, along with museums, cinemas and swimming pools.

The second-highest death rate on the continent is in Italy. The seven-day daily average of deaths is now 455, according to Worldometer. The country's vaccination campaign has been a failure. With the health care system undermined by decades of savage austerity cuts, the organization of vaccine distribution was left to regional governments. By February 20, according to the *Financial Times*, just 20 percent of the vaccines distributed thus far had been given to people over the age of 70. Only 6 percent of people aged over 80 had received a single dose, compared to more than 20 percent in Germany and France, where the vaccine campaign has been disorganized and slow from the

© World Socialist Web Site

beginning.

More broadly across the continent, even as cases are surging rapidly and the death toll is rising, governments are pushing ahead with their plans to reopen economies for the summer. With hundreds dying every day, Italy has announced it intends to vaccinate residents on its holiday islands to boost the tourism industry. The corporate media are already using the upcoming holiday period to condition popular consciousness for a further loosening of restrictions that must produce a further rapid rise in the death rate.

In Germany, the Grand Coalition government is refusing to take any measures to address the surge in cases. Yesterday there were more than 32,000 cases reported across the country. Yet schools remain open nationally, and the government is not only rejecting demands from students and teachers for school closures, but actually *increasing* the incidence rate of cases per 100,000 inhabitants required for schools to be closed, from 100 to 200.

In France, the official death toll will pass 100,000 today, as counted by Worldometer. The number of daily cases surpassed 42,000 yesterday, and almost 40,000 the day before. The total number of intensive care patients is over 5,900, the highest level since the peak of the first wave last year.

At the end of March, President Macron announced minor social-distancing measures, including the closure of primary schools for a single week before the two-week school holidays, and the closure of high schools for an additional week after the holiday break. He rejected a protracted school closure and restrictions on non-essential production because of the effect such a lockdown would have on “the economy.” Primary schools are due to reopen in ten days, while tens of thousands of cases are being reported each day.

In every country in Europe, the ruling class is pursuing essentially the same policy. One year ago, with wildcat strikes taking place in Italy demanding the idling of nonessential production to allow workers to shelter at home, and hospitals on the verge of collapse, governments imposed strict lockdowns, including closing schools and nonessential workplaces. They used this as a means to push through corporate bailouts totalling trillions of euros to support the stock markets, which have underwritten an enormous rise in the wealth of Europe’s billionaires over the past year.

They have since rejected lockdown measures, pursuing a policy of keeping schools and workplaces open, so that corporate profit making may continue, regardless of the cost to human life.

There was nothing inevitable about the death of 1 million people in Europe, and millions more around the world. It is the outcome of a deliberately policy of placing profits before lives that has been implemented by the European Union and its governments and supported by the trade unions.

In the face of a new upsurge of the virus, it is critical that the working class draws the political lessons. The implementation of a scientific policy to counter the spread of the virus is only possible through the independent mobilization of the working class for political power. Massive resources must be invested to fund a real lockdown, including the closure of nonessential workplaces, with full compensation provided to workers and small businesses. Schools must be closed, with the resources provided for all students to have high quality online learning.

The implementation of such a policy requires the fight for a socialist policy, including the expropriation of the trillions of euros hoarded by the corporate and financial elite, and the struggle for workers governments across the continent in a United Socialist States of Europe.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site