

Greek government reopens economy amid COVID intensive care “nightmare”

Katerina Selin
21 April 2021

Like all of Europe, Greece is experiencing a fierce third wave of the pandemic. With more than 4,000 new infections daily, a new high was reached at the beginning of April. Nearly 10,000 people have already died from COVID-19—about a third of them, around 3,300 people, in the last two months.

A record 847 patients currently need invasive ventilation. Intensive care units (ICU) have already been working at their limits for months and are now overcrowded. In the Attica region of Athens alone, 48 seriously ill coronavirus patients must currently be ventilated outside an intensive care unit because there are not enough intensive care beds. Dozens of patients with other illnesses who need ventilators are also not given an intensive care bed.

Nikos Kapravelos, the head of the intensive care unit at Papanikolaou Hospital in Thessaloniki, described the situation last week as a “nightmare,” saying there was no more capacity. He stressed to the Open News television station that younger and younger patients are being treated in the hospital. Three young people under 17 years old, 66 people between 18-39 years old and 1,406 between 40-64 years old have already died in Greece.

The government, under the right-wing Nea Dimokratia (ND, New Democracy) party, is responding to this critical situation with the same ruthlessness and contempt for human life as the ruling classes worldwide. Amid the third wave, the government is opening up the economy in the interests of business and the tourism industry.

On April 5 retailers were allowed to reopen, and on April 12, face-to-face classes began in lyceums—with no significant safeguards other than two rapid tests per week. However, as intensive care doctor Kapravelos commented, the self-tests used have low reliability, so many cases are missed.

After one week, almost 200 schools have already had to close completely or partially due to coronavirus outbreaks. After the Orthodox Easter holidays, which begin on May 2, primary and secondary schools are also expected to open. The virus will also find new transmission sites in churches, which are expected to be allowed to open at Easter with minor hygiene measures. A year ago, however, when daily infections were less than 100, they remained closed.

At the same time, preparations are under way for the tourist

season, which starts on May 14. Already, rules for entry into the country are being relaxed step by step. Tourism Minister Charis Theocharis claimed in parliament on Monday that the whole of Greece was “absolutely hygienically safe” and announced that priority would be given to vaccinating tourism workers. Yet only 7.2 percent of the population has been fully vaccinated.

The pseudo-left opposition party Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left) is also in favour of opening up tourism and is demanding that the government reopen outdoor catering.

Under conditions of the current pandemic and the spread of numerous dangerous variants of the virus, the opening up of tourism means one thing, above all: The profits of big business, which depend heavily on tourism, are to be secured at all costs—even if thousands have to die. Last year, the opening of tourism in the summer was a major factor in the massive spread of the virus in the autumn. Before that, Greece had comparatively low case numbers due to a quick and severe lockdown, but they then skyrocketed after the holiday season.

As a result, excess mortality in Greece increased by about 7 percent last year. According to media NGO iMedD, about 8,300 more people died than was statistically expected, an estimated 61 percent from COVID-19, the rest related to the pandemic.

To divert attention from the fatal consequences of its open-door policy, the government is trying to shift responsibility for the spread of the virus onto the population. The so-called “coronavirus parties” last weekend came just in time, with numerous young people violating the coronavirus measures and partying in public places in Athens despite the high health risks.

Immediately, the ruling class used the parties for a media campaign on state television, portraying the partying youth as the main culprits for the rising infection rates. This dishonest propaganda is designed to pull the wool over the eyes of the working class and hide who is responsible for the many coronavirus deaths and growing numbers of Long COVID sufferers.

The biggest “coronavirus parties” are taking place every day in factories, warehouses, offices and on public transport, where workers and employees are crammed close together indoors and at the mercy of the contagion without being able to

maintain adequate distance and protection. All companies are blithely operating despite the pandemic so that neither supply chains nor the soaring share prices are interrupted.

Information about the spread of the pandemic in the factories is scarce. Companies are exhausting every possible means of intimidating their employees to cover up outbreaks. Here are just a few examples of infection incidents in the workplace that have come to light:

On March 18, a factory belonging to the **packaging company** “Afoi Lalousi” in the industrial area of Avlona in the Attica region, where about 85 workers are employed, had to close for five days because of a major coronavirus outbreak. The order from the Ministry of Citizens Protection spoke of a “high epidemiological burden” and warned of a “risk to public health” but did not give specific details about the workers affected.

Last week, a worker at the Sklavenitis **supermarket chain** lost her battle with the virus, bringing to three the number of Sklavenitis workers who have died from COVID-19. Supermarket employees, who have been on the front line of the pandemic since it began, have complained of inadequate protective measures and many workplace accidents due to the heavy workload. In early March, 16 cases also occurred at a branch in Thessaloniki.

According to a local trade union of commercial and service companies in Patras, cases have been discovered in numerous shops and warehouses there this year, spreading because employers refused early testing and quarantine measures. For example, in a warehouse of the supermarket chain **Lidl**, which employs around 60 workers, a case of coronavirus was concealed for three days. It was only after pressure from the workforce that all staff were finally tested, and 15 positive cases were discovered.

Last year, too, clusters of infections kept breaking out in companies: 30 cases in a **meat processing plant** in Kavala, 50 cases in an **olive processing plant** in Halkidiki in August, and 114 cases in a **canning factory** in northern Greece in October.

The daily spread of the virus in the workplace is an open secret. The iMEDD Lab found that most of the new infections occurred in the workplace, after evaluating data for November and December 2020. Out of 758 cases reviewed, 434 occurred in occupational contexts, such as workplaces and private companies, and 166 in closed facilities, such as nursing homes, psychiatric hospitals, camps, and rehabilitation centres, it said.

At a press conference held by the Ministry of Health on April 3, epidemiologist Vana Papaevangelou, who is part of the government’s team of advisors, had to admit, “It is known that the main spread of the virus is in the workplace and at home.” In the same breath, the use of rapid tests was then touted, but this is a smokescreen given the current infection situation. Only a lockdown involving the closure of schools, day care centres and nonessential production, with all affected workers and parents receiving full wage compensation, can contain the

pandemic.

The ruling class is not only preventing the necessary lockdown but also refusing to provide any support to the health care system. Based on information from the Greek Intensive Care Association in January and February, out of 51 COVID ICUs surveyed, 40 fall short of government requirements in staffing levels, according to iMEDD.

Despite the disastrous understaffing of hospitals, the government has cut the health care budget by another 572 million euros this year. At the same time, it is obstructing reports on the conditions in the health care sector. In its current assessment on Greece, Reporters Without Borders criticises the fact that journalists must obtain government permission before they are allowed to report on hospitals. The Ministry of Health has also banned its staff from speaking to the press.

Among doctors and nurses, willingness to help and exhaustion are increasingly mixed with anger and indignation. On April 7, workers protested outside several hospitals and the Ministry of Health in Athens. Among the speakers was Doctor Kostas Katarachias, head of a workers council at the Athens hospital “Agios Savvas,” who had been dismissed after 13 years of working there, in the middle of the pandemic, for denouncing conditions in the health sector.

The Public Hospital Employees’ Union (POEDIN) is trying to control the explosive atmosphere in hospitals and therefore called for a five-hour work stoppage in Attica and a demonstration outside the Ministry of Health on Thursday, April 22.

POEDIN is working closely with the government and the establishment parties. The general secretary of the union federation, Christos Papanastasis, is also a leading member of the ND-affiliated DAKE union, and the president of POEDIN, Michalis Giannakos, belongs to a union faction close to the social democratic KINAL (formerly PASOK).



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact