

Madrid embraces “Wuhan lab” conspiracy, ends mask mandate

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Numerous editorials have appeared in the Spanish media in recent weeks giving credence to the lie that the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which causes COVID-19, escaped from a laboratory in Wuhan, China. This comes after US President Joe Biden publicly legitimised the conspiracy at the end of May and gave the US security services 90 days to investigate it.

On 28 May, *El País*, which is aligned with the ruling Socialist Party (PSOE), published an editorial entitled “Clarifying the origin of the coronavirus.” Referring to the US investigation, they stated: “What had from time to time surfaced as a mere conspiracy theory ... is now expressed, for the first time, as a possible explanation, from the knowledge that three scientists at [the Wuhan] laboratory could have contracted Covid in autumn 2019, before the disease was announced.

“The revelation of this information only makes clear the necessity of an investigation in real conditions of transparency, which China has not guaranteed up to this date,” the *El País* editorial continued. “In search of the truth, we must go all the way.”

On the same day, the right-wing *El Mundo* also published an editorial entitled “China must explain the origin of Covid-19.” It concluded: “Instead of continuing to deny everything and to obstruct the investigation, China must collaborate in clarifying where, when and how the until-then-unknown coronavirus, which has provoked the **biggest health and economic crisis in recent history**, appeared” (emphasis in original).

The embrace of this factually empty conspiracy theory comes as the so-called “progressive” PSOE-Podemos government moves to end the few remaining public health restrictions across the country, even as hundreds continue to die from the virus each week. The Spanish ruling class intends to blame its disastrous

mismanagement of the pandemic on China, while also escalating diplomatic and military tensions with Beijing.

Last week, 291 people died of COVID-19 in the country, an average of about 40 people a day. Weekly fatalities have remained roughly at this level for the last three weeks, although there had been a slight drop from the death statistics registered in March and April. Daily cases have averaged as high as 4,000–5,000 for the last month, taking the total number of infections in the country to over 3.7 million.

Official fatality figures reached the grim milestone of 80,000 last Wednesday, making Spain the thirteenth country in the world in terms of total COVID-19 deaths. This is a significant underestimate of the true scale of the health disaster in the country, however, as excess death statistics indicated that over 100,000 people had died as a result of the pandemic by March of this year.

Nearly half of Spain’s autonomous regions have test positivity rates of above 5 percent, a proportion which is considered by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a sign that the pandemic is out of control. Six regions have Intensive Care Unit (ICU) occupancy rates of on or above 20 percent, indicating high or extreme risk.

The more contagious Delta variant (previously known as the “Indian” strain) is also gaining a foothold in Spain. Last week, three outbreaks of this variant were reported across the country, totalling 39 cases, with a fourth outbreak under investigation.

Despite the unrelenting spread of the virus, the PSOE-Podemos government of Pedro Sánchez announced last week that it intends to end the mask mandate in public spaces by the end of this month or the start of July.

Last Monday, Fernando Simón, director of the Centre

for the Coordination of Health Alerts and Emergencies, said “it is possible” that the use of masks “will stop being obligatory in the middle or at the end of June, and certainly during the month of July.

“We must progressively modify the use of masks,” Simón argued. “The objective is to vaccinate 70 percent of the population in summer and it is possible that, a little before we achieve [this goal], the use of masks in some places (such as outside) will not be necessary.” Although mask use will remain compulsory in indoor spaces for now, such announcements mark a step towards the complete rescinding of mask mandates.

The PSOE-Podemos government is justifying this measure using the pretext of the supposed success of the vaccination campaign. But in reality, only 40 percent of the Spanish population has received even one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine; a mere one in five (21.6 percent) has been fully immunized with both required jabs.

Last Wednesday, the Spanish government’s Inter-territorial Council of the National Health System (CISNS) announced that night-time entertainment venues like bars and nightclubs could reopen until 2:00 or 3:00 a.m. in regions with low virus transmission. Night clubs have been closed across most of the country for more than a year.

The reopening was initially set to take place in the seven regions of Spain with the lowest incidence rates: Galicia, Cantabria, Navarra, Valencia, the Balearic Islands, Extremadura and Murcia.

Although the government implausibly claimed that mandatory social distancing of at least 1.5 metres would be in place in bars and nightclubs, in reality, this would be vastly insufficient to ensure safety and impossible to enforce. A number of capacity restrictions for restaurants and bars were also approved by the CISNS, according to the level of risk in each region.

But by Monday, even these insufficient new measures had already been suspended in the Madrid region, after right-wing regional President Isabel Díaz Ayuso denounced them as causing “immediate, irreparable and incurable harm” to the profits of hospitality companies. “They [the new rules] are arbitrary and attack the common sense and interest of Madrid residents. Don’t count on me to keep bankrupting

people,” Ayuso added.

Madrid is currently in level two of the government’s five-tier system of restrictions, indicating “medium” risk. In this tier, restaurants and bars would be permitted to open at 33 percent capacity indoors and 75 percent in outdoor patios and gardens, and nightclubs would not be allowed to open at all under the new measures approved by the CISNS.

The Madrid representative had voted against the CISNS legislation last week, along with those from Catalonia, Galicia, Andalusia, the Basque Country and Murcia, citing an “encroachment of [regional] responsibilities.” Madrid then appealed the legislation at Spain’s National Court, which ruled in the region’s favour.

In response to Madrid’s refusal to implement the capacity restrictions, the Health Ministry immediately backed down, stating that the measures were not obligatory and declaring its willingness to “negotiate” with dissenting regions. “If we have to modify a paragraph or word to reach a consensus, no problem for us,” a source from the Health Ministry told *El Diario*.

As of Monday, June 7, Spain’s borders have also been completely reopened to vaccinated holiday-makers from anywhere in the world, with no restrictions imposed on their travel. “We want to guarantee mobility even in a difficult context,” said Minister of Industry, Trade and Tourism María Reyes Maroto. “Vaccines have given us this antidote which is allowing us to return to travel.”

Tourists from the United Kingdom have been free to enter Spain without restrictions since 24 May, despite the fact that the Delta variant has become the dominant strain in the UK. They are responsible for a significant share of tourism revenues in Spain, accounting for nearly a quarter of all visitors to the country (18 million of the 84 million tourists who came to Spain in 2019).



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