

Spain proceeds with school reopenings despite high infection rates

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Though over 10,000 coronavirus cases are recorded in Spain every day, the Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government plans to send all children back to in-person education at the start of September.

The decision to fully reopen schools, even as the virus still circulates widely, poses immense dangers to children, educators and parents across Spain and internationally. The start of the new school term last autumn precipitated an enormous upsurge in infections and deaths. Before schools even reopen, however, average daily cases this year are now more than double what they were a year ago.

Soaring infection rates are hitting younger age groups particularly hard. Among school-aged children ages 12 to 19, the 14-day incidence rate exceeds 600 per 100,000 people. In five of Spain's 17 regions, this measure surpasses 1,000 per 100,000, meaning more than 1 percent of young people in these areas is suffering from COVID-19. These figures are significantly higher than the rate for the population as a whole, which stands at a still dangerously high 292 per 100,000.

Though official case numbers have fallen for the last several weeks, an average of around 10,000 people are still being infected every day. Deaths are continuing to climb. Last Friday closed with the highest weekly deaths in Spain's fifth wave, with 660 deaths.

According to the Instituto de Salud Carlos III, in the three weeks from July 26 to August 15, 82,587 children and adolescents aged between 5 and 19 were infected with the virus. Using a recent study published in *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health* showing that around 4.4 percent of children aged 5 to 17 infected with coronavirus contract Long COVID, this amounts to roughly 3,600 of them suffering persistent COVID.

Under these conditions, the PSOE-Podemos

government's reckless reopening of schools in only two weeks endangers the lives of tens of thousands of children. It is not the result of a mistaken policy, but part of an international drive based on the policy of the capitalist class to force parents back to work in unsafe conditions to further extract profits from the working class and finance skyrocketing corporate and bank bailouts.

Sending students back to school last year led to three new waves of infection. In June last year, Prime Minister Sánchez made the now-infamous statement: "We have defeated the virus." At that time, excess deaths due to the pandemic stood at 48,000. Over the following year, as the PSOE-Podemos government reopened schools in September, over 52,000 people would die needlessly. The colossal surge led to a quarter million infections each day last January.

The PSOE-Podemos government's staggering indifference to human life confirms the *British Medical Journal*'s characterization of the ruling elites' pandemic policy as "social murder." Responsibility lies above all with the "left populist" Podemos party. Having promised radical change and an end to austerity, Podemos became the PSOE's chief co-conspirator in the ruling elite's pandemic policy.

The reopening of schools takes places as even so-called mitigation measures (nightly curfews, mask mandates, banning of gatherings of more than 10 people) are lifted. Last month, at the appeal of the far-right Vox party, Spain's Constitutional Court ruled that COVID-19 lockdown measures imposed from March to June 2020 were unconstitutional.

Soon after, several regional courts ruled against nightly curfews, most recently last week in Catalonia. There, the courts ended the COVID curfew, banning the Catalan government's grossly inadequate attempt to

lower the incidence rate through nightly curfews in 148 cities and towns in the region.

The PSOE-Podemos government is not only forcing parents to send children back into unsafe schools, but is even scaling down, or even removing outright, the minimal social distancing measures that existed last school year. While masks will remain compulsory for all children above 6 years of age, social distancing, nominally still maintained, has been reduced to only 1.2 metres (4 feet).

This reduction in required social distancing will allow schools to reopen at full pre-pandemic capacity, junking already inadequate class-size limits imposed in previous terms. Infant schools will accommodate up to 25 pupils per class (compared to 20 last term), and primary schools up to 30 (up from 25). Secondary schools and post-16 education centres will return to class sizes of 30 and 35, respectively.

This takes place as only 18 percent of adolescents aged 12 to 19 are fully vaccinated. No vaccines have yet been approved for children under the age of 12. This will leave the most vulnerable to infection, serious illness, and even death.

Moreover, thousands of children and teenagers infected over the summer will begin the school term with lasting COVID-19 symptoms: extreme fatigue, chest pain, headaches, stomach aches, problems with concentration, dizziness and heart palpitations. Tens of thousands more will contract the virus as schools open and children are herded into crowded classrooms.

If the PSOE-Podemos government can proceed with this criminal policy, the political equivalent to calling for children to be sent into burning buildings, it is above all due to the role of the trade unions and pseudo-left parties which work as foot soldiers for Podemos.

Spain's two largest unions, the Workers Commissions (CC.OO) and General Union of Labour (UGT), have said nothing. Their main focus in recent months has been to oversee billions of euros in corporate bailouts being funnelled from Brussels to Spain's corporations and banks, while negotiating plant closures and tens of thousands of redundancies.

Likewise, the pseudo-left Workers Revolutionary Current (CRT) has maintained a complicit silence on the so-called "fifth wave" of the pandemic, which has infected more than 900,000 people and killed over 2,000. Over the last month, it has not published a single

article on its Izquierda Diario website addressing the risk of COVID and the threat to children as schools reopen.

Their only recent coverage of the pandemic has been two articles solidarising themselves with anti-"health pass" protests in France called with the support of the far-right. While French President Emmanuel Macron's policy is anti-scientific and insufficient to halt the spread of the pandemic, the CRT's opposition to it does not stem from a principled call for a scientifically-guided struggle to eradicate the virus. In reality, it is aligned with the ruling class' "herd immunity" policy in all its fundamentals, denouncing social distancing as "authoritarian" and "repressive."

Throughout the pandemic, the Morenoites have denounced social distancing measures such as lockdowns as "authoritarian and palliative." Last September, the CRT defended the policy of reopening schools, calling for a "safe" return to education centres, all while acknowledging that the safety of teachers and students "cannot be guaranteed." During the "fifth wave," they launched a politically criminal campaign encouraging youth to pour back into nightclubs and bars.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) has launched an international campaign to eradicate the virus, based on the policies advanced by epidemiologists and other scientists. Eradication entails the deployment of every weapon in the arsenal of measures to combat COVID-19—through masking, social distancing, mass testing, vaccination and the shutdown of schools and non-essential production, coordinated on a global scale, to stamp out the virus once and for all.

The ICFI, in support of this programme, calls on educators and other workers to form rank-and-file safety committees in every school and workplace, independent of the trade unions and the PSOE-Podemos government, to coordinate the struggle to stop the reopening of schools and end the pandemic.



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