COVID-19 surge spreads across Europe

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Official propaganda of the end of the pandemic notwithstanding, the spread of COVID-19 in Europe is taking on ever more dramatic forms. Every day, about 220,000 people become infected with the virus and almost 3,000 die.

Last week, the World Health Organisation (WHO) reported a 7 percent increase in the number of COVID-19 cases in Europe. The WHO pointed to uneven vaccination rates across the continent and stressed that the development poses a significant threat. Significantly, according to the WHO, Europe was the only region of the world where the number of daily reported cases is rising.

The situation is particularly acute in Eastern Europe. Yesterday, 1,064 people died of COVID-19 and 37,141 new cases were recorded in Russia. Experts assume that the number of unreported cases is far higher. In Ukraine (614 dead yesterday, 23,785 cases) and Romania (356 dead, 15,410 new cases), more people are dying now of COVID-19 than ever before in the pandemic.

Yesterday, with overflowing emergency wards threatening to swamp the hospital system, Ukraine announced a two-week shutdown of schools in high-infection areas, including in the capital, Kiev. Only 6.8 million of Ukraine's 41 million population, and less than one in four of Bulgaria's population, are fully vaccinated.

The situation in the Baltic States is also out of control. The cabinet in Latvia was forced to impose a night curfew and a month-long lockdown on Wednesday. Earlier, according to the health authority in Riga, there had been 1,400 new infections per 100,000 inhabitants in 14 days—a record since the beginning of the pandemic. In many hospitals, intensive care units are already fully occupied, said Health Minister Daniels Pavluts.

In the rest of Europe, the trend is moving in a similar direction. In Poland, the number of new infections is currently doubling from week to week. "If this situation continues, it will break through all the forecasts we have had so far," warned Poland's Health Minister Adam Niedzielski in Warsaw on Wednesday.

Great Britain currently has the highest number of recorded COVID-19 cases, with about 50,000 new infections daily and around 200 deaths each day. In France, Italy and Spain, where cases had remained comparatively low after a surge in cases and deaths in the late summer, the number of daily new infections has again begun to rise after hitting a low October 10-15 of 4,203, 2,456 and 1,464, respectively.

Germany has also recorded another drastic increase. For several days now, the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) has been reporting an increasing number of new daily infections; on Friday, there were almost 20,000. The seven-day incidence was 95.1 per 100,000 inhabitants, the highest level since mid-May. In its current weekly report, the RKI warns that the increase in the number of cases will accelerate as autumn and winter progress.

Across much of Europe, the situation is worse than it was at the same time last year, when hundreds of thousands died of COVID-19 during the winter. Now a similar scenario is looming.

The WHO warned in early September of 236,000 additional COVID-19 deaths by December 1. Nevertheless, the European governments did nothing to halt the spread of the virus and avert mass deaths. On the contrary: they opened schools and businesses and almost completely dismantled remaining protection measures such as mask mandates and school mitigation procedures. The current mass infections and deaths are a direct result of these policies.

Governments of all stripes—conservative, social democratic and pseudo-left—are pursuing a deliberate policy of herd immunity, putting profits over lives. In order not to jeopardise the orgy of enrichment on the stock exchanges, they insist that parents send their

children to school completely defenceless against the virus and that there must be no more closures and that one must "live with the virus."

Whether or not they claim to be following procedures to "mitigate" the spread of COVID-19, the results of the policies the European powers pursue are largely indistinguishable from the far-right's calls to develop "herd immunity" via mass infection of the population with coronavirus. Indeed, the far right has long called for an end to all social restriction measures linked to the pandemic.

In Germany, Health Minister Jens Spahn's plan to end the "epidemic situation" and de facto eliminate all remaining protective measures by November 25 is supported by the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) as well as by the Left Party. The Left Party in Saarland, led by party founder Oskar Lafontaine, even wants a "Freedom Day" on October 30, following the British example, demanding that COVID-19 measures be ignored. It is "high time for a 'Freedom Day' instead of 'German Angst'," the party declared in an official statement.

Hard experience has shown it is impossible to obtain a more rational, scientific policy against the pandemic by voting establishment parties labelled as "left" into office. In France, allies of the Left Party in Jean-Luc Mélenchon's Unsubmissive France party, together with the *Révolution permanente* web site and the Workers Struggle (LO) party, all endorsed participation in anti-vaccine demonstrations despite overwhelming popular support for vaccination. More than 75 percent of the French population is vaccinated.

In Spain, the "left populist" Podemos party is in power together with the social-democratic Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE). Yet there have been over 100,000 excess deaths in Spain during the pandemic, and the courts are now ruling that even the limited lockdowns imposed last year to halt the initial wave of the pandemic—in response to mass strikes in Italy, Spain and across much of Europe—were illegal and unconstitutional.

The ruling elite's contempt for the massive deaths and suffering caused by the pandemic was on full display at the two-day European Council summit that ended yesterday in Brussels. The discussion centred largely on how to deny Afghan refugees passing through former Soviet republics entry into the European Union (EU), and the Polish government's attempts to disregard European legal rulings. COVID-19 was barely mentioned in news reports on the summit, though the summit web site briefly called for "efforts to overcome vaccine hesitancy to be stepped up."

At the same time, the EU countries are pouring hundreds of billions of euros into military budgets, which continue to increase even despite the fall in economic activity due to the pandemic.

Mass death, now unfolding on a scale usually only seen in times of war, must be stopped. Already, over 1.27 million people have died of COVID-19 across Europe. Worldwide, almost 5 million have officially succumbed to the virus. Recent studies suggest that the actual death toll is much higher, with the COVID-19 pandemic leading to approximately 15 million deaths worldwide, including approximately 1.8 million in Europe.

To save lives, workers must arm themselves with a scientific and political understanding of the pandemic and build a political movement to impose a scientific policy to eliminate COVID-19. Ending the pandemic requires the implementation of lockdowns—with full compensation for affected workers and small businesses, combined with vaccination, contact tracing and isolation of infected people.

International support for the third global school strike on October 22 has again underlined that there is broad support in the working class for a policy aiming to halt all human-to-human transmission of COVID-19 and eliminate the virus.

On October 24, the WSWS and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) are holding an online webinar to explain the scientific basis for such a strategy to a global audience. We call on all our readers to register today, inform your friends, relatives and colleagues and spread the word about the event as widely as possible on social media.

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