

Moscow mayor rules out extension of COVID-19 restrictions amidst surge in cases and deaths

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Moscow Mayor Sergey Sobyenin declared Wednesday that the “workfree week” in Moscow, which began on October 26, would not be extended beyond November 7 because the pandemic situation had been “stabilized.” This statement flies in the face of reality.

Russia continues to report near-records of cases and deaths almost daily, with 40,443 new cases (slightly less than the record of 40,993) and 1,189 deaths on Wednesday, the highest number of daily deaths yet. The surge has been virtually unbroken for over a month. Over 242,000 deaths have been officially reported since the pandemic began. The true death toll is believed to be far higher, and Russia has reported an excess death toll of over 723,350 since the beginning of the pandemic.

The capital has been and remains the center of the surge, with Moscow and the Moscow region accounting for almost one-fourth of all cases in the country. About one-tenth of the total population lives in Moscow, which is the center of Russia’s economic, political and cultural life.

On Wednesday, 6,827 new cases and 95 deaths were reported in the capital, with the second highest number of cases, 3,269, less than half, being reported in St. Petersburg. The Moscow region reported the third highest number of cases (2,744).

For the past 10 days, over 1,500 people and between 20 and 30 children were hospitalized in the capital every day. As of Monday, 10,000 people were hospitalized in serious condition, among them 300 children. Several of the 751 people currently on ventilators in the capital are children.

Russia has very low vaccination rates, with just about

a third of the population fully vaccinated and less than 40 percent having received at least one jab. At the current rate of vaccination, over two months will be needed to vaccinate another 10 percent of the population.

Seventy-five percent of those who have not received the vaccine have indicated in polls that they do not intend to get vaccinated. The main reasons for the reluctance to get vaccinated are the enormous popular distrust, if not hatred, of the state and the systematic promotion of anti-scientific, irrational and religious conceptions since the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.

However, the low vaccination rates are just a part of the explanation for the current surge. The ruling class in Russia, mirroring the criminal policies of Washington, Berlin, Paris and London, has allowed the virus to rip through the population largely unchecked for well over a year. Schools were reopened in September at the height of the previous wave, and major factories have been open non-stop since April 2020.

The “workfree” week recommended by Russian President Vladimir Putin to the regional authorities for the week of October 30-November 7 was from the beginning a much belated and wholly inadequate measure.

Only a few regions imposed full-scale lockdowns, and many of the country’s biggest state-owned enterprises were exempt from the order from the beginning. No travel restrictions were imposed, and there was a reported spike in vacation bookings for Egypt and the Black Sea.

In an indication of the unserious attitude toward the coronavirus crisis that has been promoted, some

businesses announced their closures by wishing their employees and customers a “happy vacation.” Major sports and cultural events were allowed to go ahead, and mask mandates are still not being enforced.

So far, only the Novgorod region has announced that it will extend the “workfree week” until November 14. A doctor from the region earlier revealed that infections had risen by 22 percent last week.

About half of the cases are occurring in the working population, and 30 percent among pensioners. The rest (about 20 percent) were accounted for by children, most of them between 7 and 17 years old. Only between 11 and 13 percent of those infected were not showing any clinical symptoms.

While the Russian education ministry has announced that college education might continue on a remote basis for the foreseeable future, the end of the “workfree week” will mean the reopening of schools under conditions of what is already a horrifying scale of infections among children. Last week, the Russian health minister revealed that almost 60,000 children in the country were being treated for COVID-19, with half of them showing “acute” symptoms. Cases and hospitalizations have since grown further.

On Monday, the Russian health ministry’s expert for infectious diseases, Yuri Lobzin, stated that between 1 and 12 percent of all children in the country’s regions are falling ill with the virus, with a 7.6 percent nationwide average.

While 60 percent of those infected have “mild” cases or show no symptoms, a staggering 40 percent do show clinical symptoms. Moreover, a medical expert earlier estimated that about 13.5 percent of all children who have been infected in Russia suffer from Long COVID, which can include respiratory as well as neurological symptoms, such as fatigue, the inability to concentrate and the loss of several IQ points. Many of those who suffer Long COVID initially showed only “mild,” if any, symptoms.

Hospitals, including special COVID-19 hospitals for children, are still being opened up across the country to deal with the surge in hospitalizations. The country now has 290,000 hospital beds opened up for COVID-19 patients, well above the 270,000 hospital beds that were needed during the previous peak of the pandemic.

Critical shortages of oxygen have been reported in

several regions, including the Altai region, North Ossetia, the Chuvashia region and the Komi republic. A doctor at Infectious Diseases Hospital in the Chuvashia region told the *Moscow Times*, “We are getting to the point where we will have to choose who gets the oxygen.”

The governor of the small northern republic of Komi said that the situation was about to “burst” and described oxygen as “the new gold.” A medic working in an infectious diseases hospital in the region described the mood there as “tense, borderline dramatic.” He added, “Sometimes the oxygen gets here at the very last minute, [and] we feel like we are living on the edge.”

Dmitriy Kuznetsov, the general manager of a major producer of medical oxygen, Cryogenmash, told the newspaper, “I don’t want to sound hysterical, but the situation is very tense. There isn’t really a way we can scale up our production.”

The current surge threatens to overwhelm the already overburdened and exhausted medical workforce. A poll revealed that almost 30 percent of health care workers who are taking care of COVID-19 patients are close to handing in their resignation because of exhaustion. Some 37 percent are suffering health problems because of emotional exhaustion. Only 12.6 percent of doctors and nurses who are working in COVID hospitals and departments indicated that they are still “full of energy” and “enjoy going to work.”

In neighboring countries across Eastern Europe, including the Baltic States and Ukraine, as well as the UK, the virus also continues to surge.

The ending of the restriction measures under these conditions can be described only as a crime against entire generations of young people, their parents and the working class as a whole. It comes in the context of the aggressive push by the ruling class in countries such as the US, UK and Germany to put an end to all, however limited, efforts to mitigate the spread of the pandemic and growing pressure on countries like China to abandon their “zero COVID” policy.



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