

COVID cases and deaths surge to record levels in Greece

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Nearly 1,600 people have lost their life to COVID-19 so far this month in Greece. It brings the total number of people who have succumbed to the virus since the start of the pandemic to 17,517 out of a 10.3 million population.

There has been a huge upsurge in the number of daily cases over the previous month and a half. Over the first seven days of October average daily cases recorded were 2,174. Cases are now on average more than three times higher. The record for the highest number of daily cases was broken on November 9 when 8,623 were diagnosed.

Greece is rapidly heading towards a million cases of COVID, with yesterday's 7,108 cases bringing the total to 901,661.

Particularly hard hit is northern Greece with hospitals forced to turn people away such as the Papanikolaou General Hospital located in the outskirts of Thessaloniki, Greece's second city. Speaking to SKAI TV on November 20, the head of the hospital's intensive care units (ICU) said that his department saw all beds occupied at the start of the day. "This has never happened before... We are in an emergency situation and the health system, doctors and nurses have all reached their limits."

The devastation of Greece's healthcare system under the onslaught of the pandemic is the direct consequence of the brutal austerity imposed by successive conservative, social-democratic and pseudo-left governments at the behest of the European Union and International Monetary Fund over the previous decade. Total healthcare spending decreased from 9.52 percent of GDP in 2010, when the first austerity package was signed, to 7.72 percent in 2018. According to a 2020 OECD report Greece had 5.3 ICU beds per 100,000 population in 2019 just before the pandemic began,

well below the EU average of 12.9 ICU beds per 100,000 population.

The New Democracy (ND) government has played down the crisis in the health service with a recent health ministry announcement boasting that "the government has more than doubled ICU beds adhering to all necessary procedures. All beds that have been procured meet all the prerequisites required, have all required equipment and are staffed with specialised personnel."

The government's bragging is refuted by other official figures. Nearly 92 percent of all Covid ICU beds are currently occupied nationwide with the number of those on ventilators as of November 23 standing at 597—up nearly 39 percent since the start of the month.

The care provided in many of those newly set up units is "intensive" in name only. In an interview with medical news site *iatronet.gr*, Ioannis Kioumis a lung and infectious disease specialist who teaches at the University of Thessaloniki said, "When you create new ICU beds that did not exist before it follows that these and especially the personnel around them will not be of the same calibre as that in established Intensive Care Units."

To deflect from its criminal handling of the pandemic the government has focused on the fact that the majority of those hospitalised have not been vaccinated. In a televised address last week Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis called the latest wave "a pandemic of the unvaccinated".

Only 61.1 percent of all adults have been fully vaccinated in Greece which is lower than the EU average of 65.5 percent and this has undoubtedly contributed to needless deaths. However, the fault for this lies with the government.

The number of fully vaccinated people hospitalised in

the last couple of months has also been steadily increasing. Immunity from the vaccine reduces as time goes on, with millions of people susceptible to being infected or re-infected. On August 30, the proportion of fully vaccinated people on ventilators stood at 8.58 percent of the total. Just two months later, on October 31, this had nearly doubled to 15.2 percent. As of this week, the proportion of the vaccinated on ventilators was at 17.59 percent.

Following the lead from governments across Europe and internationally, Greece's government did not present the vaccine as one of a series of public health tools to tackle the pandemic but as a panacea that would allow a return to normal life. The existence of COVID vaccines was used to justify the jacking of all other public health measures that impinged on the profit interests of the ruling elite, despite increasing evidence that vaccination alone would not be enough to suppress the more contagious Delta variant.

This legitimised all manner of pseudo-scientific thought with a raft of self-styled "experts" given air-time in the media to promote their anti-lockdown, anti-mask and anti-vaccination theories.

One such individual is cardiologist Faidon Vovolis who has used his medical credentials over the past year to sow fear about the safety of mask wearing and vaccines, which he has dismissed as "experimental". He has set up his own political party called "Free Again". Figures such as Vovolis are presented in the media as a de facto opposition to the government, yet the promotion of such individuals has in turn facilitated ND's herd immunity agenda of mass infection of the population with a deadly disease.

Seeking to present himself on the side of science in his TV address Mitsotakis said, "I call on you to turn your back to fear and to every charlatan who for the sake of raising their publicity and exposure capitalises on ignorance." But far from seeking to mobilise the scientific community to dispel the lies spread by Vovolis and his ilk, Mitsotakis' government court such layers, as underscored by the appointing of the far-right Thanos Plevris, a well-known vaccine sceptic, to the post of Health Minister in a cabinet reshuffle at the end of August.

When the H1N1 influenza pandemic spread in 2009-10, Plevris encouraged right-wing opponents of vaccination and railed in parliament, while he was a

deputy for the far-right LAOS party, against doctors calling on citizens to get vaccinated, denouncing them for creating "panic". At the start of July in an interview with the *Alpha* radio station Plevris, who is in charge of the government's vaccination drive, told an interviewer it was not the government's job to convince people to get vaccinated!

Mitsotakis made clear that no measures will be taken that will cut across the profit interests of the ruling elite, declaring, "Greece is mourning needless losses simply because it does not have the vaccination levels of other countries. And this despite the fact of the perfect campaign by the government. However, the government and society have signed an honourable contract: to not close down, with the vaccine as our shield. And we need to abide by the conditions of this agreement."

The key measure announced to supposedly tackle the upsurge in cases was that, as of this week, the unvaccinated are not permitted entry into closed venues such as cinemas, theatres and gyms.

As to preventing wider community transmission, no serious measures are being taken. Schools and non-essential businesses will continue to remain open while the only measure to address overcrowding on public transport during peak time is a requirement for businesses to operate a staggered timetable. Public transport routinely operates at full capacity despite the already high legal limit of 85 percent capacity mandated by the government.



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