

Irish coalition government forced to introduce new restrictions as COVID cases surge

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On Thursday, Ireland's National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) confirmed a further 4,022 new cases of COVID-19 with 530 patients hospitalised and 115 in intensive care. There were 81 deaths the previous week. In all 5,788 people have now died from COVID in the country. Daily infection rates have been running at around 5,000 for weeks now.

Although Ireland is one of the most vaccinated countries in the world, the country currently also has one of the highest rates of infection. As of December 6, 1,355 of every 100,000 people were infected with coronavirus. Just under 15 percent of all tests are returning positive results. Daily new case rates are twice the average across Europe.

Faced with the surge in cases, the coalition government made up of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party was forced December 3 to extend COVID-19 emergency legislation until January 9, 2022 and re-introduce minimal restrictions.

From Tuesday this week, home visits were limited to individuals from four households. Social distancing requirements, restrictions on table numbers in restaurants and mandatory mask wearing have also been re-introduced. Nightclubs will close, and indoor sporting events, concerts, cultural and entertainment events have been reduced to 50 percent of capacity. At all these events a person will need "proof of immunity" to enter.

The government has partially restored the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP). This was first introduced in March 2020 for those who had lost employment due to COVID-19 restrictions. New applications to the scheme were suspended in July 2021. Now it is being reintroduced on a graded and miserly basis with the worst-paid workers receiving as little as €150 per week.

At a recent NPHE meeting, Chief Medical Officer Dr Tony Holohan called for government restrictions to combat the virus to protect critical care capacity in the hospital system. As more people come forward for treatment for non-COVID related health issues, the Irish health system, suffering from decades of cuts and staff shortages, is beginning to tear at the seams. Accelerating COVID-19 cases threaten to overwhelm capacity. With an additional five cases of the even more transmissible Omicron variant identified in Ireland Thursday, this brings the total to six.

The Republic of Ireland already has one of the longest waiting times in the European Union for various medical procedures. It has 622,963 people waiting for outpatient procedures. During the first week of November 2,305 patients waited on trolleys due to bed shortages—the highest number since the pandemic began.

NPHE's minutes from November gave insight into the spread of the virus into care, health and education institutions. In the week to November 6, three nursing homes, two community hospitals, 10 acute hospitals, 13 disability centres, two homeless units, two child residential centres, a prison, an older people's centre and an addiction unit all reported outbreaks, as did six "other healthcare" services. Cases were also reported in seven childcare facilities, two schools and one university. Twenty-four workplaces, including ten associated with manufacturing, recorded outbreaks.

The rate of infection in children aged 5-12 has risen dramatically. Nearly 20,000 cases were reported in the last four weeks.

Last weekend, it was widely reported that two primary schools in Dublin developed large infection clusters. At Saint Pauls Senior School in Ayrfield, 12 out of 18 pupils in the same class were infected, as well

as staff members. The second school reported 10 cases in one class.

Principal of St Paul's Senior School Feargal Brougham appealed for "honesty" from the authorities about what is happening in primary schools. He told broadcaster RTE, "I would ask that public health revisit their assurances that children are not transmitting the virus in schools. When community transmission is at such a height, I don't believe that any mitigation measures can stop it from spreading in the classroom too."

Both schools complained of a complete lack of support from the authorities in dealing with the outbreaks. According to the principle of the second, unnamed, school, "They take our query, log it, and then public health ignores it".

Keeping schools open as child minding facilities so parents can work and keep profits flowing is the overriding concern of the coalition government and the ruling elite it serves. As infections surge, Taoiseach Micheál Martin told the Dáil last week there is "no talk of closing schools", despite his admitting that cases of COVID-19 among children have gone "through the roof". With the latest restrictions children will be required to wear masks from nine years up while attending school.

The new restrictions are overall mainly aimed at sporting events, concerts, cultural and entertainment events, restricting social life over the Christmas period. Profits, however, will continue to flow from production and the financial sector over the holiday period. As infections and hospitalisations soar the government has suggested people work from home only "where possible" in the full knowledge that tens of thousands will be forced to continue to labour in dangerous workplaces.

The spiralling case and death numbers bear witness to the criminal policy pursued by the coalition. One year ago, the government opened up the economy for Christmas at the behest of business interests, triggering waves of infections, hospitalisations and deaths. In July, despite much evidence that hasty removal of travel restrictions contributed to waves of infection, the government opened up travel, as deaths from the virus surpassed 5,000 and the Delta variant emerged.

The government is backed by a relentless propaganda offensive mounted by big business, exemplified by

billionaire airline boss Michael O'Leary. The Ryanair CEO, speaking for the entire corporate oligarchy, is continually given media coverage to complain that NPHET is disseminating misinformation, "scare stories" and stoking "mass hysteria". In July, during the summer holiday season, he rubbished NPHET's warnings about the Delta strain as a "variant scariant" in a letter to government. O'Leary accused NPHET of "making it up as they go along".

The situation in Northern Ireland is very similar. The Chief Scientific Officer Professor Ian Young warned this week of an incoming wave of infection associated with the Omicron variant. "When it comes will be rapid and potentially the wave will be large compared with previous waves of the virus in terms of numbers of cases". Both Young and the Chief Medical Officer Sir Michael McBride, spoke of likely restrictions before Christmas but said it was not possible to predict measures necessary to keep the new variant under control. Closing schools would be "the very, very last thing we look at" insisted McBride.

The Northern Ireland Executive, led by Democratic Unionist Party First Minister Paul Givan and his Sinn Fein Deputy Michelle O'Neill, insisted decisions would not be taken in "panic mode". O'Neill told the BBC that "what we're doing is enough". In all, 2,912 people have died of COVID-19 in the north, 329 are currently in hospital, including 38 in intensive care. 1,933 new cases were reported on Wednesday, up from 1,658 the previous day.

The rapidly advancing crisis in Ireland underscores the importance of the Global Workers' Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic, initiated by the *World Socialist Web Site*. If the pandemic is to be stopped it will be through mobilisation of the working class internationally.



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