

Podemos leader Yolanda Diaz admits she covered up danger from COVID-19

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Yolanda Díaz, now Podemos general secretary and deputy prime minister of the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government, has claimed that she knew the dangers of COVID-19 before the pandemic began. However, she agreed to calls within the government not to take action or to publicly discuss the need for aggressive public health measures.

In a recent radio interview, Díaz claimed she was aware of the danger the virus posed on February 15, 2020. That is a month before several European governments decided to carry out strict lockdowns after a wave of wildcat strikes erupted in European auto, steel and logistics industries to demand the right to shelter at home to avoid infection across Europe. Díaz said:

“I remember well that Pablo [Iglesias, then leader of Podemos] was deputy prime minister and I called him, devastated by what was happening. On February 15, as the pandemic hit Italy strongly, I summoned my team because I was convinced that Spain is Italy and we needed to deploy a lot of measures because we saw what was going to happen. So much so that on March 4, I presented a highly controversial guide to the Government, and I was accused of being an alarmist.”

Díaz, like the rest of the PSOE-Podemos government, knew how dangerous the virus was and agreed to keep silent. Over the next year, the virus caused over 100,000 deaths and over 5 million infections in Spain. Her remarks thus expose the PSOE-Podemos government’s politically-criminal indifference and deliberate negligence.

Díaz’s statements apparently mark an attempt to distance herself from her fellow PSOE ministers on the issue of their murderous management of the pandemic. Spain is facing a sixth upsurge of the virus, which threatens to kill tens of thousands, amid a wave of strikes and anti-austerity protests across Spain and internationally. The plain fact, however, is that Podemos was a full partner in the PSOE’s prioritising of profits

over human lives.

The WSWs noted last year that the Spanish government already had evidence of the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic since at least January 2020. Last year, journalist Bob Woodward revealed that US President Donald Trump received briefings from intelligence sources that the COVID-19 pandemic would be “the biggest national security threat you face in your presidency.” Yet Trump then deliberately misled the public about the severity of COVID-19.

The WSWs explained that this revelation also exposed European governments, who had access to similar data and deliberately downplayed the risks posed by the pandemic. Indeed, Pablo Iglesias, who was Podemos general secretary and deputy prime minister at the time, sat on the Intelligence Affairs Commission in charge of directing, supervising and controlling the activities of the National Intelligence Center (CNI). Spain’s embassy in Beijing was also reportedly warned about the virus.

Díaz’s reference to February 15 is significant, insofar as it exposes her cynical and false pose of concern about the health of the Spanish people. Three days before, the organisers of the Mobile World Congress (MWC) had suspended an event that routinely gathers over 100,000 participants.

This measure, an important warning about the danger from the virus, was harshly criticized by the government. Then-PSOE Health Minister Salvador Illa declared that there was “no public health reason to adopt any measure regarding any event planned in Barcelona, Catalonia or Spain.” Vice President Nadia Calviño called the decision to suspend the MWC “totally premature,” boasting that Spain had “one of the most efficient and effective health systems in the world.” That system would be on the verge of collapse just a month later.

While she now claims she was “devastated” by her government’s role in misleading the public, Yolanda Díaz

in fact joined the chorus of government misleaders and falsifiers. She neither condemned the remarks of her fellow ministers nor alerted the working class. Instead, as Labour Minister, she denounced the MWC, stressing her concern about “the impact that the cancellation of the Mobile World Congress may have on the unemployment figures for this month of February.”

Díaz made no significant statement about the virus until March 4, as COVID-19 tore through workplaces, mass transit and schools, and Spain reported its first death. On that day, the Labour Ministry published an action guide for companies. At that time, Italy was already under lockdown, with hundreds of infections and dozens of daily deaths.

The guide did not do much beyond recalling elementary health measures and the legal right that workers have, in case of imminent danger to their health, to leave their workplaces. Its publication was criticized by Spain’s big business association the CEOE (Spanish Confederation of Business Organizations), which accused it of “generating alarm and confusion.” Similarly, General Union of Labour (UGT) leader Pepe Álvarez, criticized the guide on March 5, calling it “unilateral.”

Díaz backed down after Health Minister Illa dismissed the guide as “not a protocol that companies should follow,” agreeing that only the Health Ministry could decide upon health measures.

The following day, she publicly downplayed the virus. Interviewed before the parliament, she said, “we have to be cautious. I send a message of calm. Nothing is happening. We have to act the way we have been doing so far.” Not one word was said about how her own government disregarded her “guide.”

In the following days, as workers remained on the job to continue producing profits for the financial markets, thousands of workers were infected on the job. The PSOE-Podemos government adopted public health measures only on March 14, when they were compelled to adopt a strict lockdown. Before this, it had allowed a feminist march to proceed in Madrid on March 8, though it was expected to gather tens of thousands of people.

Díaz did not participate in the demonstration, though leading members of the government did, only briefly explaining, “We are in a pandemic and the main thing is public health.” She stayed silently at home, while allowing thousands of protesters to be infected.

Díaz’s statements are monuments of cynicism and hypocrisy. She and the other Podemos leaders were key to implementing the policy of “learning to live with the

virus.” Though they knew the danger the virus posed, they downplayed it from the outset to let the capitalists keep making money at the cost of over 100,000 lives in Spain, and 1.5 million in Europe.

Díaz later helped rapidly reopen workplaces, as the spring 2020 lockdown was lifted before the virus was under control. Working with the Workers Commissions (CCOO) and UGT unions, she forced millions of workers back to nonessential work. They did this even as unions recognised that most companies “are not in a position to guarantee these health and safety conditions,” as CCOO leader Unai Sordo declared in April 2020. This led to disaster.

Today Podemos plays the same essentially criminal role. The COVID-19 pandemic is exploding out of control in Spain, as the more contagious Omicron variant spreads rapidly across Europe. Spain this week recorded 60,041 cases Thursday and 49,823 cases Wednesday, the highest infection totals ever. Yet it continues to oppose critical public health measures in order to defend capitalist profits.

Díaz’s role is a warning on “left populist” parties and politicians allied to Podemos internationally, like Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in America, Jean-Luc Mélenchon of La France Insoumise, Janine Wissler of Die Linke in Germany, and Syriza in Greece. Drawn from the affluent middle class and based on anti-scientific identity politics of race and gender, they adopt murderous policies based on lies about life-and-death issues for the working class.

The *World Socialist Web Site* is promoting a Global Workers’ Inquest on the COVID-19 Pandemic, to reveal the crime committed by the capitalist system in response to the pandemic and the necessity of a political response by the working class. This will also expose Podemos and figures like Díaz who use lies, disinformation and provocations to mislead workers in Spain and internationally.



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