

Daily COVID-19 infections near 1 million as Omicron wave engulfs Europe

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The working class faces the urgent need to mobilize to impose health policies to stop an unprecedented tidal wave of COVID-19 cases sweeping over Europe. Capitalist governments are proceeding with open contempt for human life. Even as the Omicron variant pushes infections past record levels and threatens to swamp hospitals, they are adopting minimal restrictions and pressing to limit quarantine periods for those sick with or exposed to the virus.

Yesterday, France recorded 208,099 new COVID-19 cases, Britain 183,037, Spain 100,760, Italy 98,030, Greece 28,828, and Portugal 26,867. These are all record numbers, that have, moreover, doubled in just the last two to three days. Other countries posting record numbers are Denmark, with 22,023, Ireland 16,428, and Switzerland at 16,760 Wednesday. In Germany, Health Minister Karl Lauterbach said new infections are massively under-reported, and are two or three times higher than the 40,042 cases reported Wednesday—itsself a 45 percent increase over Tuesday.

Official statistics with over 830,000 new infections in Europe yesterday are gross underestimates: testing capacity has been reached in several countries, which can no longer track the contagion. The test positivity rate is above 10 percent in Germany, Norway, Spain and the Netherlands, and above 5 percent in the UK, France, Italy, Turkey and Denmark. According to the WHO, a test positivity rate of over 5 percent means the virus is infecting far more people than are being diagnosed.

On Wednesday, walk-in PCR tests were unavailable in England and Northern Ireland, UK pharmacies reported shortages of lateral flow tests, and the Republic of Ireland's positivity rate was 45.22 percent. In India's deadly Delta wave, as hospitals collapsed, this rate peaked at 22.3 percent.

World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus warned: "I'm highly

concerned that Omicron, being more transmissible [and] circulating at the same time as Delta, is leading to a tsunami of cases." He added that this will place "immense pressure on exhausted health workers and health systems on the brink of collapse."

Operating with open contempt for human life, European governments are abandoning any pretence of limiting the spread of the virus. Only the shutdown of nonessential production and in-person schooling can stop the massive surge in illness now underway and limit the resulting surge in deaths. Yet they are rejecting such measures out of hand and loosening quarantine restrictions, so as to keep enough workers on the job even as massive numbers of them fall ill.

Yesterday, French Health Minister Olivier Véran told the National Assembly that France faces an Omicron "tidal wave." Currently, 2 percent of the French people have COVID-19 and, according to Véran, 10 percent have recently been exposed. Nonetheless, though he admitted that hospital admissions have risen 49 percent in just one week, he claimed there is no longer "any correlation with the increase in circulation of the virus," implying that France might be spared an increase in serious cases and deaths even if COVID-19 infections mount.

Speaking yesterday, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez all but admitted that his decision not to take action against the virus reflected his prioritizing corporate profits over human life, saying that it reflected the need "to balance public health, mental health and economic growth."

After allowing Christmas celebrations to proceed normally, another round of super-spreader events for New Year's celebrations are being encouraged. In the UK, Prime Minister Boris Johnson has said there will be no new restrictions before the new year. Nor have additional federal restrictions been put in place in Spain or France for celebrations on December 31. In Italy, public events

have been cancelled, but an unlimited number of people are permitted to meet privately.

So far, Omicron infections have been disproportionately concentrated in younger adults. The inter-generational mixing of the holiday period will allow the variant to move to older generations, among whom it will cause far more severe disease and death.

European governments' attempts to lull workers to sleep on the severity of the crisis are exposed by the crisis in Britain, where the Omicron surge began earlier than elsewhere in Europe, Yesterday, 10,462 people were hospitalized with COVID-19, the most since March 1. In London, the epicentre of the Omicron surge, this figure is 3,310, up 63 percent week-on-week. Sixty percent of Omicron admissions are among twice- or triple-vaccinated patients.

UK authorities have told hospitals to make emergency preparations for record hospitalizations from Omicron's "super-surge," included converting hospital canteens and car parks into field hospitals. Already one in 10 UK National Health Service (NHS) staff are isolating. In the last week, 512 children have been hospitalized for COVID-19, a 52 percent increase and a pandemic record.

Nonetheless, throughout Europe, governments are planning a full resumption of nonessential production after the holidays, and the full reopening of schools and universities on January 3. With schools acting as vectors of contagion, this will accelerate infections, hospitalizations, Long COVID cases, and COVID-19 deaths among children, who are mostly unvaccinated.

To be able to keep children at school, workers at work and profits flowing to the banks, European governments are implementing measures that will actually increase infection rates. Authorities across Europe are following the lead of the US Centers for Disease Control's decision to cut the isolation periods of infected individuals from 10 to five days.

In Spain, on Wednesday the national government lowered isolation time from 10 to seven days for vaccinated individuals. Similar measures are being considered in France, Italy and Greece, while the UK already reduced isolation from 10 to seven days for the double vaccinated on December 22.

These measures are flagrantly unscientific. As the pandemic began, the WHO recommended 14 days of isolation after COVID-19 infection to ensure the virus is not passed on. The CDC adopted the five-day isolation rule in response to demands from airline and other corporate executives as staff shortages due to disease cut

into holiday profit-making. Looking enviously over the Atlantic, European capitalists are determined to impose the same deadly measures on workers in Europe.

Workers must be warned. After nearly 1.5 million people have died in Europe from the pandemic, there is no question that the ruling class is willing to pursue reckless policies that will cost millions of lives. Indeed, at the very beginning of the pandemic, even as German intelligence warned that letting the virus spread unhindered in Germany would cost over 1 million lives, Johnson suggested, "perhaps you could take it on the chin, take it all in one go and allow the disease, as it were, to move through the population."

This was only prevented by an independent mobilization of workers which began in Italy in the first days of March 2020, and quickly spread throughout Europe and to the US. The resulting lockdowns stopped transmission, but cut into corporate and billionaire profits. The ruling elite vowed to never permit any such incursion again, no matter what the death toll.

Today, only the independent mobilization of millions of workers can impose a scientific policy necessary to combat the virus. The ability of a scientific policy to eliminate the virus has been shown in China, where lockdowns, contact tracing and isolation of infected people eliminated transmission of the virus inside China's borders. In 2021, just two people have died of COVID-19 in China, a country with a population of 1.4 billion.

Workers and youth cannot be left exposed to mass death. Rank-and-file safety committees must be formed in workplaces, schools, and neighbourhoods to demand the shutdown of nonessential production and the implementation of scientific policies to eliminate the virus. During a period of lockdown, workers and their families must be supported with a full income, paid for by impounding the wealth of the financial aristocracy.



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