

As Omicron infections soar, Europe's governments force the sick back to work

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The tidal wave of Omicron infections is exposing the urgent necessity of mobilizing the working class against the criminal policies of the ruling elite. Europe recorded its 100 millionth case of COVID-19 over the New Year holiday as much of Europe posted infections at record levels. Yet governments across Europe are slashing isolation periods for people infected with or exposed to the virus, ensuring that sick, contagious individuals will return to work and school.

Europe has posted about a third of the world's confirmed cases as global infections quadrupled over the last two weeks to around 2 million, driven by the Omicron variant. On January 1, despite reduced holiday testing, France found 219,126 cases and Italy 141,353, both records, and Britain posted a near-record 161,692. Countries posting record infections as 2021 ended included Spain at 161,688, Greece 40,560, Portugal 30,829, Ireland 23,281, and Denmark at 22,023.

Denmark, an early European epicenter of Omicron, has the world's highest percentage of its population confirmed sick with COVID-19, with a seven-day incidence rate of 2,514.9 infections per 100,000 inhabitants. This figure is 1,976 in Britain, 1,679 in France, 1,418 in Portugal, 1,414 in Greece, 1,234 in Spain and 1,128 in Italy.

The infection statistics massively underestimate the spread of the virus, however, due to insufficient testing. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that a pandemic is out of control if over 5 percent of tests come back positive, as this shows testing is too small compared to the size of the outbreak. In last year's Delta outbreak in India, this test positivity rate peaked at 22.3 percent. This rate has risen to 49.7 percent in Ireland, a seven-day average of 24.5 percent in Britain, 15.8 percent in France, and between 24.7 and 50.1 percent in various Spanish regions.

Statistician David Spiegelhalter told the BBC that given

these data, daily infections in Britain alone are actually around 500,000, calling it an "unprecedented wave of infection and very daunting."

Reporting of COVID-19 cases is also downplayed in central and eastern Europe, where the Omicron wave is believed to be only in its early stages. Test positivity rates in late December were 18.6 percent in Germany, 15.74 percent in Poland, and 19.83 percent in Ukraine, where the 7-day moving average of reported cases yesterday were 28,451, 11,085 and 4,202, respectively.

German Health Minister Karl Lauterbach gave a similar estimate last week as Spiegelhalter in Britain, saying infection statistics underestimate actual cases by a factor of two to three.

This would mean that actual daily infections across Europe are well into the millions. European governments are nonetheless pouring fuel on the fire, following the example of Britain and Spain in slashing COVID-19 isolation periods to force infected people back into schools and workplaces.

On Sunday, the French government announced that COVID-19 patients will isolate for at most seven days, although they may return to work after five days if their viral load is too small to be detected on an antigen test. If they are unvaccinated, the isolation period is prolonged to 10 days. Those exposed to an infected person will no longer self-isolate at all, unless they are unvaccinated in which case, they will self-isolate for seven days. Children under 12 who are exposed will return to school if they test negative on an antigen test.

An example of the type of super-spreader events these guidelines will produce came late in December, when Britain's DJ Dimension traveled to New Zealand and tested positive only after his 10-day quarantine was over, and he had traveled and performed at nightclubs in Auckland.

Since the incubation period for COVID-19 is 14 days or

more, and antigen tests are notoriously inaccurate, the French guidelines will result in masses of infected people returning to work or school.

Health Minister Olivier Véran, who announced these rules on Sunday to the *Journal du Dimanche*, bluntly declared, “We must avoid all forms of [economic] paralysis.” That is to say, that the purpose of these guidelines is to ensure that, as millions of workers fall ill, the state can force enough of them back to work to prevent any serious interruption in the flow of profits to the banks.

On December 31, Martin Hirsch, the director of the Paris area hospitals (AP-HP), warned that the French public hospital system “risks capsizing” in January, with 25 percent of the workforce out due to illness. Hirsch added that the Health Ministry is forcing health staff to work when positive for COVID-19 if they have light symptoms. Hirsch said the AP-HP is closely following events in London, which was hit earlier by the Omicron wave, to see how they might be affected.

Currently, 110,000 of the UK National Health Service’s 983,000 staff are not at work, and one in ten UK rail workers are off sick. December 29 saw 2,370 COVID-19 hospital admissions in England on December 29, up 90 percent week-on-week and the highest number since January 2021. Asked about the situation, however, UK Education Secretary Nadhim Zahawi said, “There’s nothing in the data that gives me any concern that we need to go beyond where we are at.”

Countries across Europe are however considering or implementing similar isolation protocols that will accelerate the contagion. Italy has lifted self-isolation requirements for exposed individuals who are vaccinated, Switzerland has reduced isolation times for exposed individuals from 10 to 7 days, and that only for people living with infected individuals. Such guidelines are also being discussed in Belgium, Germany and beyond.

The policy pursued by the European capitalist class has an unabashedly fascistic character, opposing any measure to halt the contagion of this deadly virus. In his brief New Year’s greetings to the French people, President Emmanuel Macron said that he would “do everything to avoid restrictions that weigh on our liberties.” He added, “Responsibilities have more weight than rights.”

The “president of the rich” was arguing that workers’ right to life and health is subordinated to their responsibility to work and produce profits for the ruling class. This argument was echoed in an editorial by the *Financial Times* (FT) of London, titled “The world must

learn to live with Covid this year.” It asserted, “Whatever slim chance we might have had at the beginning of 2020 to eliminate Covid-19 has long gone. Efforts to control the pandemic have been justified so far in the context of a global health emergency but they cannot continue indefinitely.”

To justify abandoning efforts to control the pandemic, the FT argued that “collateral damage [to] the global economy would be too great.” Instead, it called on the population to rely on immunity from vaccines and “repeated exposure to what will sooner or later become an endemic infection.”

European governments, following the FT, are now working to give the population repeated massive exposure and infection by COVID-19. Workers and youth must be warned: this is a recipe for mass circulation of the virus, constant emergence of new variants, and endless mass death.

Over 392,000 of the 1.66 million COVID-19 deaths the WHO has confirmed in Europe occurred since September 2021. This is leading to mass death even in countries with higher vaccination rates, such as France, where the number of weekly deaths passed above 1,000 in mid-December and is continuing to rise. Everything indicates, moreover, that with infections exploding and hospitals increasingly overwhelmed, the number of deaths will now mount rapidly.

A policy of Zero COVID, implemented in China and a few other Asia-Pacific countries, but pursued globally, is the alternative to the ruling elite’s policy of mass death. This requires the independent organization of the working class and youth in rank-and-file committees in workplaces and schools to oversee safety, defend the social right to a safe workplace, and impose public health policies to save lives and end the pandemic.



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