

Hundreds of thousands of educators, children infected in Spanish schools

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Hundreds of thousands of educators and pupils are off sick with COVID-19 in Spain a week into Spain's return to schools after the Christmas break. The Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government has forced children and teachers to attend school in person, despite skyrocketing COVID-19 cases and hospitalisations.

On average, more than 132,000 people have been infected with COVID-19 every day in Spain over the last week, three and a half times more than the highest average infection figures recorded at any other time in the pandemic. Almost 1 million people tested positive in the last seven days alone. The incidence rate has rocketed up to well over 3 percent nationwide.

These case figures barely scratch the surface, however, as Spain's inadequate testing facilities are unable to keep up with the demand. Across Spain, 40 percent of coronavirus tests are returning a positive result, more than eight times higher than the World Health Organization's recommended rate of 5 percent, which indicates that the testing is adequate to detect all cases. In some regions, the test positivity rate is between 50 and 70 percent.

Nearly 19,000 people are currently hospitalised with COVID-19, the most since early February 2021. Almost a quarter of intensive care unit (ICU) beds are occupied by coronavirus patients, or 2,251 people. These rates have not been seen since May last year.

The PSOE-Podemos government's decision to force schools to reopen as the pandemic runs rampant throughout Spain is criminal and reactionary. The Spanish ruling elite is no longer even pretending to fight the spread of contagion, and is instead openly calling for COVID-19 to be treated like influenza and allowed to spread unimpeded within the population.

Speaking to Spanish radio channel Cadena Ser on Monday 10 January, PSOE Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez called for the virus to be permitted to become endemic. It's a "necessary debate," Sánchez stated. Scientists have

given the world the "response to protect ourselves," he declared, adding that they must begin "evaluating the evolution of COVID into an endemic illness."

In the same interview, Sánchez confirmed that his government is working on a new COVID-19 monitoring system which will treat coronavirus data in the same way as influenza data. Health Minister Carolina Darias has also discussed this with her counterparts across Europe.

The deliberate mass infection of pupils and teachers, who returned to classrooms on 10 January, is a part of the PSOE-Podemos government's policy of making the virus endemic. Virtually no measures have been put in place even to mitigate the transmission of the virus, other than vague instructions for children and educators to wear masks and regularly wash their hands, and that classrooms are to be well ventilated. Pupils and teachers no longer are to quarantine if they have been in contact with a positive case, unless at least five members of their classroom are infected.

Despite the reduced quarantine requirements, by the end of the first week back at school, on January 14, more than 102,000 pupils and 19,335 teachers were off school either sick or isolating. This is 1.6 percent and 3.2 percent of the total number of students and educators, respectively.

However, this data is only partial, as it leaves out three of Spain's 17 provinces, including the Madrid region, home to Spain's capital and most populous city. One other region, Castilla-La Mancha, only reported absence statistics for teachers, not pupils.

In the 12 regions where coronavirus has been continuously reported, the number of educator absences has doubled since the last date that figures were reported prior to the Christmas break, and has increased more than seven-fold since early December.

According to estimates by unions and education centres themselves, even these figures are vast underestimates. They report that 6 to 8 percent of education staff have

been unable to attend work due to COVID-19, while pupil absences are between 10 and 15 percent. Staff absences had reached 25 percent in some areas, according to Toni González, president of the Federation of Headteachers Associations in Public Schools (FEDADI).

Mass infection of pupils and the disruption to education caused by teacher absences give the lie to claims that reopening schools for in-person learning has anything to do with child well-being. In reality, children and youth have been herded back into schools so their parents can continue working in unsafe factories, offices and other workplaces.

The unions have done nothing to oppose the government's right-wing policy, making only weak, rhetorical calls for more health measures in schools. They have issued no calls for schools to be shut until they can be made safe.

"We are going to see what happens," stated Maribel Loranca, head of education in the PSOE-aligned General Union of Workers (UGT), "because I believe that if the situation continues like this, the educational and health administrations are going to have to take measures if they want to guarantee, as they've been saying, in-person education."

Meanwhile, the pseudo-left parties like the Morenoite Workers' Revolutionary Current (CRT) promote illusions in the unions, combining support for school reopenings with vague calls for the unions to issue a "mobilisation plan" to demand more safety measures in education facilities.

In an article in their online publication Izquierda Diario on January 13, the Morenoites made limited criticisms of longstanding overcrowding, claiming that the main coronavirus mitigation measure needed in schools is to hire more teachers to reduce class sizes. After rhetorically denouncing regional governments for blaming high infections on teachers not following health guidelines, the article states,

"But instead of increasing the education budget to lower [student-teacher] ratios, hiring more staff, having sufficient protective material and strengthening health provision with more staff and means, they [the regional authorities] say nothing."

The article concludes by pointing to the teachers' strike

in France, and calling on unions in Spain to organise action to ensure that schools stay open with safety measures. "This is the first measure that the education unions must take," the article declares.

"Many of them have criticised the lack of safety measures but they have to turn words into acts," it continues, "convening assemblies in the [education] centres and calling for a mobilisation plan, for a return to safe classrooms and for other compensatory measures for families in need, such as paid leave to care for quarantining children."

In another article titled "Six urgent measures for a safe return to the classrooms," the Morenoites continue this argument. After detailing a laundry list of insufficient measures to supposedly make schools safe, including their usual calls for more staff and funding, they make vague criticisms of unions for "not even deigning to start a campaign of struggle in the education sector."

Their solution, however, is to call on workers to pressure the union bureaucracies to wage such a struggle! "Therefore we call on workers in the teaching sector to organise their response," they state, "bringing together the whole educational committee under a workers' programme in defense of public education and for the necessary measures to ensure it is high quality and safe, forcing the unions to fulfill their role: defending the working class."

The unions have no intention of calling strikes, whether to shut down in-person schooling or to simply provide more protective equipment. Educators and the workers more broadly in Spain and internationally must take matters into their own hands, forming rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions and the parties of bourgeois rule, to implement a scientific strategy to end the pandemic and save lives.



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