Europe’s governments go all in for “herd immunity”

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At the end of last month, Denmark’s Social Democratic Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen announced a large-scale human experiment. On February 1, virtually all remaining coronavirus regulations were dropped—mandatory mask wearing, social distancing, verification of vaccination or test status. Large events are now also allowed again in Denmark, and bars and discos are allowed to fully open.

Frederiksen had already declared the pandemic over once before, in September last year. But at that time, the number of weekly infections was below 50 per 100,000 inhabitants. Now the seven-day incidence level is more than 100 times higher at 5,300, making Denmark the European frontrunner. One in 10 inhabitants is currently infected.

Nevertheless, the government has abolished all protective measures. This is like opening the dams that were built against catastrophic flooding during continuous rain. The Danish government is deliberately betting on infecting the country’s 5.8 million residents in the shortest possible time, even if many will pay for it with their lives or permanent damage to their health. Particularly at risk are children under age five, for whom there is no vaccine protection.

Millions across Europe responded to Frederiksen’s provocative move with horror. Newspaper editors and government offices, on the other hand, rejoiced. “Herd immunity,” meaning in practice the deliberate mass infection of the population, is now the official policy of every European government. What was only openly advocated in Stockholm and London at the beginning of the pandemic now represents the European consensus. At most, there are only differences in the speed with which this goal is to be achieved.

Britain, Austria, Spain, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Switzerland have already largely abolished previous restrictions and rules. France and Germany are on their way.

In the UK, Prime Minister Boris Johnson is going by the motto “hear nothing, see nothing, say nothing.” He has announced not only the abolition of all coronavirus regulations still in force, but also of the obligation to report coronavirus-related deaths. Even the quarantine obligation for those infected is up for discussion.

In Spain, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez had already declared in mid-January that the pandemic would be treated like influenza in future. Testing and contact tracing have been drastically reduced, and the infection figures are being calculated using new counting methods.

On February 1, Norway abolished all existing restrictions except for the requirement to wear a mask and the one metre distance rule. “We will have to live with high infection numbers, and we can live with high infection numbers,” was the reason given by Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre.

The government of the Netherlands announced a relaxation of coronavirus protection measures on January 26, despite record infection numbers. Restaurants, theatres, cinemas, museums, and football stadiums will be allowed to reopen.

Switzerland, whose rules were always loose anyway, has abolished the requirement to work from home and quarantining for contacts of those infected. Infected persons must now only quarantine for five days. The requirement to provide a certificate of vaccination status to enter restaurants and events and the obligation to wear a mask at work and in public places are to be dropped in mid-February.

In France, President Emmanuel Macron is gradually lifting contact and mask restrictions, even though more than 320,000 people are still becoming infected every day.

Germany has responded to the steep rise in infections by restricting testing so that the actual numbers can no longer be tracked, and contacts can no longer take sick leave. Although schools have been proven to be major breeding grounds for the virus, they remain open. It is only a matter of weeks before the last protective measures will fall there, too.

Yet coronavirus is ravaging Europe like never before. Last week alone, around 12 million new infections were registered—more than since the pandemic began. There were 21,500 Europeans who died from COVID-19 last week, and more than 1.6 million have died since the beginning of the pandemic, not counting the number of unreported cases. The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that 60 percent of all Europeans will be infected with the highly contagious Omicron variant by mid-March.

Amid the highest wave of the pandemic, governments are justifying their homicidal herd immunity policies with the lie that a combination of vaccination, immunisation through infection and the milder nature of the Omicron variant will make the pandemic manageable.

Even experts who know better have subscribed to this line of argument, under immense political pressure. For example, at a press conference in Copenhagen, Hans Kluge, WHO Director for Europe, declared that Omicron gave Europe a unique chance to get the spread of the virus under control and ushered in an “end game”

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of the pandemic.

The large number of vaccinations and natural immunisation acquired through infection with Omicron, the approaching end of winter, and the reduced severity of the variant gave Europe the prospect of a possible "ceasefire" in the fight against the virus, Kluge said. After the wave subsides, there would be global immunity—at least "for a few weeks and months."

Kluge cautioned, however, that vaccination must continue, vulnerable people must be protected, emerging variants must be monitored, and the health system must be prepared for possible future waves. The coronavirus had "surprised us more than once, so we have to be very careful," he said. Nevertheless, his statements irresponsibly downplay the enormous dangers of the herd immunity strategy.

Its costs are unbearably high. Already 3,000 people are dying every day in Europe, and this number will continue to rise due to the steep increase in infections and low vaccination rates in many countries. For example, only 74 percent of the population in Germany and only 76 percent in France are fully vaccinated, compared to 81 percent in Denmark.

Moreover, the pandemic can only be fought internationally. The herd immunity strategy in Europe and the US, where the Biden administration is pursuing the same course, will inevitably lead to an increase in infections on other continents, where even fewer people are vaccinated. This will also increase the risk of more infectious and deadly variants developing that are resistant to the existing vaccines.

Also completely ignored is the danger that large sections of the population will suffer from the results of the disease for life. "A frightening prognosis is being made: Long Covid threatens to become a widespread disease," writes the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* (FAZ) in a detailed article on the research results to date.

Due to the lack of uniform disease criteria and recording methods, there are no comprehensive figures yet, but the results of existing studies into Long COVID are alarming. The number of people infected with the coronavirus who still experience symptoms months later, even if the original illness is mild, ranges from 2 to 40 percent, depending on the criteria and the study. The most frequent symptom is fatigue. In addition, there is shortness of breath, concentration problems, a general reduction in performance, heart palpitations, and loss of the sense of taste and smell.

"While Covid-19 is mainly dangerous for the elderly and immunocompromised patients," FAZ summarises the research results, "Long Covid is a problem for many young adults and children." Although many links are still unclear, evidence is accumulating that COVID causes sustained damage to the vascular system. "This is another reason why Covid-19 is more than a cold, it is a systemic disease," concludes FAZ.

The danger that young people and children will suffer lifelong damage to their health is therefore extremely high.

In contrast to Kluge, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has explicitly warned of the consequences of the herd immunity policy. On January 24, at the WHO Executive Board meeting, he said, "Learning to live with COVID cannot mean that we give this virus a free ride. It cannot mean that we accept almost 50,000 deaths a week from a preventable and treatable disease. It cannot mean that we accept an unacceptable burden on our health systems, when every day, exhausted health workers go once again to the front line. It cannot mean that we ignore the consequences of Long COVID, which we don't yet fully understand. It cannot mean that we gamble on a virus whose evolution we cannot control, nor predict.

"There are different scenarios for how the pandemic could play out, and how the acute phase could end—but it is dangerous to assume that Omicron will be the last variant, or that we are in the endgame," he added.

There is no scientific justification for the murderous herd immunity strategy. It has exclusively political motivations. To keep the economy running and profits flowing, the ruling class is willing to sacrifice countless lives and the health of the next generation.

Public health care is one of the greatest social achievements of the 19th century. State hygiene measures and broad access to medical care ensured, for the first time, that a large section of the population reached an age of 60, 70 and more.

All this is being called into question today. Capitalist society is deeply sick. While Amazon founder Jeff Bezos builds himself a yacht for 430 million euros and plans to have a historic bridge in Rotterdam demolished to launch it at sea, there is no money for protecting the lives of millions.

All parties that defend capitalism—from the nominally left to the right—support herd immunity policies. The hope that they can be persuaded to change course through petitions or pressure is illusory.

Only an independent movement of the international working class, linking resistance to the policies of deliberate mass infection with the struggle against exploitation, social inequality, the dismantling of democracy and war, can stop this murderous policy.

The overwhelming majority of the population is appalled and outraged by the herd immunity strategy. What is needed is the building of a party that represents their interests and arms them with a socialist perspective—the International Committee of the Fourth International and its sections, the Socialist Equality Parties.

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