

Covid-19 still spreading in Spain as PSOE-Podemos government ends mask mandate

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COVID-19 cases are rising once again in Spain only weeks after the Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government ended the country's mask mandate in indoor spaces. Spain has recorded over 12 million coronavirus cases since the start of the pandemic—more than a quarter of its population—and well over 100,000 deaths.

While data is skewed by irregular reporting, cases have clearly been trending upwards since mid-April. By last Friday, a seven-day average of just over 16,500 new infections a day was reported, compared to a daily figure of 4,961 on April 15. Hospital admissions are also rising, up from 3,881 hospitalisations in the week ending April 16 to 5,371 in the week to April 27, the last week for which figures are available.

Over the last fortnight, around 1,000 people have died of COVID-19. More than 550 people died of the virus in the week ending May 1, averaging about 80 deaths a day. The following week, just under 490 people lost their lives. Many media outlets are now speaking of an impending “seventh wave” of the pandemic in Spain.

Incidence rates are also rising, although data reporting has been scaled down to such an extent that it is now close to meaningless. As of March 29, 7- and 14-day incidence rates have only been reported for the 60+ age group, as part of the Public Health Commission's (CSP) misnamed “COVID-19 Surveillance and Control Strategy.” For this age group, the 14-day incidence rate almost doubled from 435.42 per 100,000 people on April 12 to 813.22 on May 10.

According to the CSP, its new framework is one that “observes and directs actions at people and environments of greater vulnerability and monitors serious cases of COVID-19 and cases in vulnerable environments and people.” In reality, this strategy means downplaying the severity of the pandemic,

covering up infection figures and refusing to take measures to combat the spread of the virus—whether in vulnerable settings or otherwise.

Throughout the pandemic, the PSOE-Podemos government has refused to follow a scientifically guided policy to eliminate the virus, instead prioritising the profits of the banks and big business. The government's criminal policy has had devastating consequences for the lives and health of the Spanish population. Now, even the most basic anti-COVID public health measures are being ended.

As of April 20, the PSOE-Podemos government lifted the mask mandate that had been in place for nearly two years. Face coverings will no longer be required in any outdoor or indoor space, with the limited exceptions of public transport and health and social care settings. The impact of this reactionary policy is already being felt in the significant rise in infections.

Compulsory masking was one of the last health policies to remain after the PSOE-Podemos government dropped virtually all other pandemic-related restrictions at the end of March. The requirement to isolate if infected with COVID-19 was ended, other than in vulnerable settings like care homes for the elderly. At the same time, access to accurate PCR tests was severely limited, now only available on medical prescription.

The ending of COVID-19 measures finds no broad support within the Spanish population. According to a 40dB poll conducted for newspaper *El País*, almost half (48.5 percent) of people feel “only a little or not at all safe” when they consider going about their day-to-day life without a face covering. The same survey also showed that 54 percent of the population deem the ending of the mask mandate to have come too soon, compared to only 28.2 percent who believe now to be

the right moment and 10.2 percent who feel it is coming too late.

The majority of respondents to the survey also said that they would continue using a mask even in places where it's no longer compulsory. Seventy percent of those polled said it was "very" or "quite" likely that they would continue wearing a mask in shops, with 69 percent giving the same answers for cinemas, theatres and concerts. Sixty-two percent said they would still use a face covering in sports centres, and 61 percent at their workplace.

The ending of restrictions comes as new variants continue to spread throughout Spain and internationally. The XE strain, a "recombinant" of the BA.1 and BA.2 sub-variants of Omicron, which was first discovered in the United Kingdom in January, is now starting to be transmitted in Spain, with around 2 percent of sequenced cases corresponding to this strain.

In mid-April, the World Health Organization stated that XE may be as much as 10 percent more transmissible than the already highly infectious Omicron variant.

Spain has also detected cases of the BA.5 sub-variant of Omicron, which is thought to be immune resistant. "The first in vitro studies indicate that prior infection with BA.1 would offer a lesser degree of protection against BA.4 and BA.5 than that which has been observed against BA.2," Spain's Ministry of Health reported.

The spread of new and more contagious variants will not and is not just leading to an increase in hospitalisations and deaths, but also to the long-term incapacitation of large swathes of the population who survive infection with the virus.

At the end of April, the Independent Trade Union and Civil Servants' Confederation (CSIF) reported that approximately 22,000 health care workers have suffered from symptoms of Long COVID, which can include headaches, fatigue, dizziness, muscular pain, problems with concentration and shortness of breath.

Between 10 and 15 percent of all people infected with the coronavirus continue to suffer symptoms weeks or months after being infected with the virus. And according to the March 10 government figures, 217,987 confirmed cases of COVID have been recorded among health care workers, leading to the CSIF's estimate of

22,000.

Of the 1,000 health professionals consulted by the CSIF, over half (56.7 percent) also said that they received no support or assistance after returning to work post-recovery. Forty-nine percent of those surveyed also stated that their infection with COVID-19 had not been classed as an accident at work nor as an occupational illness.

According to estimates from the Multidisciplinary Work Group (GTM), which has worked with Spain's Ministry of Science and Innovation on the coronavirus pandemic, more than a million people across the whole country may have or may still be suffering from Long COVID.

The longer-term impact of COVID over years, or even decades, is not yet known, but a recent study from the University of Cambridge and Imperial College London showed that severe cases of COVID could cause cognitive impairment equivalent to ageing 20 years.

The pandemic response cannot be left in the hands of representatives of the capitalist state such as Podemos and the PSOE, who have demonstrated their utter hostility to a scientifically guided policy to bring the pandemic to an end. Only an independent movement of the international working class, in irreconcilable opposition to parties of bourgeois rule, can stop this murderous policy of mass infection and save lives.



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