

Spain, European epicentre of monkeypox, enters seventh COVID-19 wave

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Spain has officially entered a seventh wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, driven by the highly infectious and immunity-evading Omicron BA.2 and XE, XT and BA.2.12.1 subvariants, even as it also becomes an epicentre of the monkeypox outbreak.

On April 20, the Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government lifted compulsory masking, one of the few remaining public health measures left in place after the opening measures in March. Since April 20, nearly 2,000 people have died of COVID-19.

On May 28, there were 6,980 people hospitalized in Intensive Care Units (ICU), 1,300 more than the 5,635 hospitalized on April 20. The 14-day notification rate of newly reported COVID-19 cases per 100,000 population is 663. However, this only counts the cases in people over 60. An incidence of more than 500 cases per 100,000 people is considered high risk.

The Ministry of Health registered 45,919 new cases of coronavirus this Friday, including 22,120 that occurred in people over 60 years of age. The total number of recorded COVID-19 infections now stands at 12,360,256, or over one-quarter of the population.

In addition, 260 deaths have been recorded in the last week, making the official deaths from COVID-19 106,341 people. This is a significant underestimate. According to an investigation published by *The Lancet* magazine in March, from December 2019 to December 2021, excess deaths in Spain from the virus stand at 162,000, 64 percent higher than the official figure of 98,900 reported in December.

The data show that the COVID-19 pandemic continues to pose a serious danger. The PSOE-Podemos government has, however, reacted with complete indifference, continuing its “let it rip” strategy of mass infection, allowing COVID-19 to continue to infect, incapacitate and kill tens of

thousands.

Key to this policy is “normalising” the virus by equating its treatment with the flu. Over the last two months, the PSOE-Podemos government eliminated practically all restrictions and controls on the spread of the pandemic. These include:

- The requirement to self-isolate if infected with COVID-19, other than in vulnerable settings like elderly homes.
- Limiting access to accurate PCR tests, now only available on medical prescription.
- Lifting mandatory use of indoor masking, except on public transport and in health centres.
- Removal of almost all measures in educational centres: quarantines; safety distancing of 1.2 meters between pupils; the bubble system; fixed seats on school buses; and preventing parents from re-entering schools and participating in face-to-face tutoring.

This PSOE-Podemos policy is rooted in class interests: to treat “economic health” and “human life” as comparable, with the former prioritised over the latter. After eliminating quarantines, the Health Ministry established that sick leave should no longer be given to close contacts of COVID-19 patients or to those exposed to COVID-19. Even those infected who are asymptomatic or with mild symptoms are denied sick leave, a measure the capitalist class sees as essential to keep workers on the job.

These measures have been denounced by health professionals. Last week, Margarita del Val, a virologist and immunologist coordinating the Interdisciplinary Thematic Research Platform on Global Health from the Spanish National Research Council established in March 2020 to fight the pandemic, denounced the PSOE-Podemos’ removal of monitoring of the virus.

During the first International Summit on Pandemic Management held in Valencia, she stated that we are in a “very difficult time.” She said, “We have little data and we don’t know what will happen, but I’m almost sure that when Christmas comes, with our usual behavior, we will catch other respiratory diseases and Covid.”

Dr. Francisco José Sáez, the head of the Occupational Health Working Group of the Spanish Society of General and Family Physicians (SEMG), also denounced these measures. He told the digital newspaper *Acta Sanitaria* that the lack of monitoring of incidence in those under 60 years of age clearly falsifies pandemic data. He said doctors do not understand “that if you have a sick patient under 60 years of age [with COVID-19], this will not be recorded. This explains why the prevalence of the disease is falling in Spain.”

Health professionals are also suffering from the state’s refusal to consider COVID-19 an occupational disease. Sáez explained that if a health professional has complied with all the health and safety measures, and gets infected, they will be told that “you have not caught the disease here and you will have caught it at home.” In other words, “if you get it, it was by mistake.”

Sáez noted: “right now, sick leave is not being given to people who get COVID-19 in a nursing home.” They are being told “that they can go back to work without problems if they put on the mask ... but if, later, one of these people develops Long Covid, it will not be recognised as such.”

The PSOE-Podemos government is not only condemning millions of workers to infection, but also leaving them defenceless against Long COVID. An estimated 10 percent of those infected suffer from Long COVID. According to the Multidisciplinary Working Group on the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 1 million people are likely suffering from it in Spain.

Long COVID is not even considered an illness in Spain, however. Patients with this condition do not receive specific medical care for it and cannot get sick leave. María Lorenzo, a member of the working group of the Persistent Covid Asturias collective, said: “We depend on the family doctor to believe us when we tell him our symptoms, if not, he refers us to mental health services.”

Even Health Minister Carolina Darias acknowledged in March of this year that the Spanish health system did not have enough information on Long COVID. At that time, she announced that a study had been requested from the Carlos III Institute. But this is a cynical ploy. The study was entrusted to Ferrán Barbé, a pulmonologist who has publicly downplayed the virus and even denied its existence.

The study’s lack of rigour has been reported to the Ombudsman by organisations including the Long Covid ACTS Patient Groups and Associations Platform, the Long Covid Aragón Association, the Madrid Persistent Covid 19 Collective, the Spanish Society of General and Family Physicians (SEMG), the SATSE Nursing Union and the State Confederation of Medical Unions. They point out that the sample of patients in the study is too small to be representative, and that the study questionnaire is biased to avoid the fundamental symptoms of Long COVID.

None of this is an error or a coincidence. The PSOE-Podemos government is seeking to reduce sick leave and allocate the minimum health resources to treating the sick. The aim is to force the more than 1 million people affected to go to work while sick, and to save as much money as possible on their health treatment. At the same time, the European Union is spending billions of euros on sending weapons to Ukraine to wage war on Russia.

The PSOE-Podemos’ criminality in relation to COVID-19 is a warning about how it will react to the monkeypox outbreak. Spain has 142 cases of monkeypox, making it an epicentre of the virus in Europe. Luckily, all cases are evolving well and are mild, but limiting the contagion is essential. For this, early diagnosis and isolating the patient is important, something which the PSOE-Podemos government has already proven to be hostile to against COVID-19. The virus is now spreading rapidly in seven regions in Spain, with the Madrid region leading with at least 66 cases.



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