

Europe's governments prepare third winter of mass COVID-19 infection and death

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Contrary to the propaganda of the European political establishment and the corporate media the COVID-19 pandemic is not over. Thousands of people continue to die each week across Europe from the virus and a new winter surge, alongside other respiratory illnesses and increasing poverty, will lead to hundreds of thousands more excess deaths on the continent.

Another winter of mass infection and death from COVID-19 is primarily a product of the European ruling class's decision to allow the virus to freely spread through the population. With a "vaccine only" strategy and the near-total abandonment of even minimal measures to contain the spread of the virus, epidemiologists are warning of the deadly impact of two new vaccine resistant variants this winter.

In Europe over the past two weeks cases have fallen slightly as the eighth wave of the virus slowly subsides. In the last seven days there were just over 1 million cases throughout Europe, compared to 1.5 million in the week before. There were 4,216 deaths in the last week, compared to 5,449 the week before.

However, scientists are warning that the rapid spread of immunity-evading new variants in Europe will lead to a massive surge of the virus on the scale of the Omicron wave last winter. Omicron was first detected in Europe on November 19, 2021, and the original variant and its offshoots have caused the majority of over 600,000 European COVID-19 deaths since.

On Friday, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) warned of the spread of the BQ.1.1 variant, which has immune escape from BA.5-targeted antibodies. The BA.5 and BA.4 drove the summer waves of COVID-19 throughout Europe.

BQ.1.1 is already dominant in France and accounts for more than 40 percent of infections in the UK. The ECDC predicts that it will be dominant across the

continent in mid-November. This is also when new bivalent vaccines protecting against BA.1, BA.4 and BA.5 are scheduled to hit the European market. The effectiveness of these bivalent vaccines and their older counterparts against BQ.1 will be reduced, although it is not yet known to what extent.

In a press conference on October 26, Marco Cavaleri, the head of the European Medicines Agency (EMA) vaccine strategy, stated that the EMA is also tracking the progress of the XBB variant in Europe. Due to its high number of protein spike mutations, it has been dubbed "the nightmare variant," and is currently driving surges in Singapore and India. Early studies of XBB show significant immune escape from vaccines and the nullification of anti-viral treatments. A pre-print study from a lab in China describes the variant as, "the most antibody-evasive strain tested, far exceeding BA.5."

It is possible that the vaccine resistant BQ1.1 and XBB variants will drive back-to-back or simultaneous waves. Cornelius Roemer, a computational biologist at the University of Basel in Switzerland, told *Nature* magazine, "If it turns out that XBB is going to dominate globally in the end, we might see some sort of double wave in Europe and North America."

It is also likely that the two variants are so genetically distinct that infection-based immunity conferred by BQ1.1 will be evaded by XBB and *vice versa*. Meanwhile, the level of vaccine conferred immunity is also waning amongst the European population. New vaccine doses are being taken up at a much slower rate than previously and the level of immunity gained from previous doses is continuously decreasing. These factors will significantly increase the number of infections and deaths over the winter.

In a massive COVID-19 surge, alongside other

respiratory illnesses such as influenza and the effects of increased poverty and potential energy shortages, it is likely that many European hospitals, many of which are already near or overcapacity, will collapse under the weight of incoming patients.

Discounting the initial wave of the virus in early 2020, this will be the northern hemisphere's third winter of mass infection and death, and its second since the development of vaccines.

Indeed, over each of the last three years, the level of European deaths has remained consistent, despite the invention of life-saving vaccines. If March 1, 2020, is taken as the start of the pandemic, then in the first 12 months, around 845,000 died in Europe. The next year, after vaccines had been developed, between March 1, 2021, and March 1, 2022, 905,000 Europeans died. Since March 1, 2022, 220,000 people have died, and this is before the winter surge.

This constant level of death and the ever-present threat of illness underlines the criminal nature of the ruling class response to the pandemic. In France, a trial involving major figures under Emmanuel Macron's first presidency is revealing considerable evidence that the French government broke the law in failing to take measures to stop the spread of COVID-19 in early 2020. This policy was mirrored throughout the Europe and the world, apart from China.

Measures were only reluctantly put in place in March 2020 by governments following a wave of wildcat strikes which began in Italy and soon spread throughout Europe and to the United States. However, at this time capitalist governments resolved not to eliminate the virus, but to force workers back to workplaces to resume the extraction of profit as soon as possible.

After the development of vaccines, the governments have pursued a "vaccine only" policy that has proven to be deadly for the working class. These vaccines were highly effective and have enormously reduced the proportion of those infected who fall seriously ill or die. But infection rates surged to astronomic levels, so that even after the first life-saving vaccines were rolled out in Europe in December 2020, nearly 1.5 million Europeans died from COVID-19 due to the malign neglect of the ruling class.

Under this policy, the impact of pandemic on the population is not being alleviated, but in fact threatens to get worse. In the same October 26 press conference,

Cavaleri warned that new COVID-19 variants are evolving faster than vaccines are being developed. According to the World Health Organization, now over 300 Omicron sub-lineages are being tracked worldwide.

With more and more variants spreading freely, the mutation rate of the virus is increasing exponentially, making it harder to track variants and ascertain their risk, in a situation described as "variant soup" according to an article in *Nature*. A "vaccine only" strategy thus only ensures year after year of mass infection and death. Furthermore, epidemiologists' ability to accurately track variants has also been systemically undermined by the gutting of testing infrastructure and reporting since European governments declared the pandemic over.

The criminal response of the French government in March 2020 was not the exception, but the rule for the pandemic response through Europe. At every possible juncture governments have lifted what remained of measures to stem the spread of the virus.

The ruling class in Europe and elsewhere have been able to achieve this only insofar as it has successfully suppressed scientific knowledge of the virus and its destructive impact on the human body. This continues with the consistent denunciation of China's Zero COVID policy, which has saved millions of lives and has shown that eliminating the virus globally is possible.

Against this, the working class must actively struggle against the criminal and anti-scientific policy of the capitalist class throughout Europe and the world.

The vehicle for this opposition is the Global Workers' Inquest into the pandemic, which was launched by the WSWS to give workers and young people a scientific understanding of the virus, while also unmasking the criminal record of capitalist governments throughout the pandemic. Workers and scientists who want to contribute their experiences or expertise to the Inquest should contact the WSWS today.



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