

Low levels of testing in Europe obscure rapid COVID-19 winter surge

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Despite the near-total abandonment of testing across the EU, it is becoming clear that COVID-19 is surging across the continent. Alongside major surges of the flu and other respiratory viruses, this latest surge of COVID-19 threatens European hospital systems with another winter of overcrowding, horrendous working conditions, triaged care and mass death.

According to Worldometer, Europe has recorded 1,966,286 COVID-19 deaths and nearly 240 million cases. In September of this year the World Health Organization Europe estimated that Long COVID sufferers now number 17 million people, a figure that has undoubtedly risen across October and November.

The latest wave of infections is being driven by the BQ.1 and BQ.1.1 variants, which are both descendants of BA.5, itself derived from the original Omicron variant. BQ.1 and BQ.1.1 are estimated to account for over 50 percent of cases in Europe and are expected to account for 80 percent by the new year.

According to a study published in *Nature* on Tuesday by a team from the University of Texas Medical Branch, the antibody response in people vaccinated with bivalent vaccines was four times lower against BQ1.1 than against BA.5. On Friday, the European Medicines Agency warned that the BQ.1 and BQ.1.1 variants, which appear to be becoming dominant in Europe, can at least partially evade anti-viral treatments due to radical changes in their spike protein.

A major issue facing health care workers, scientists and the wider population is the lack of accurate testing data across the continent. In many European countries, PCR testing has effectively stopped, and even access to professionally administered rapid antigen tests is restricted—forcing many symptomatic individuals to rely on unreliable home tests or to forgo testing altogether.

A low level of testing during the rapid circulation of any communicable deadly disease is extremely dangerous for a population. Firstly, no one, from concerned individuals, scientists to health care officials, let alone government officials, can have an accurate picture of the infection rate and all its consequences.

Secondly, as new, potentially deadlier COVID-19 variants evolve, it is impossible to accurately track their movement through local and global populations. Indeed, according to the European Center for Disease Control, over half of its member states, including Spain, Portugal, Italy and most of Eastern Europe, failed to reach the sequencing volume target as a result of an insufficient number of tests.

The UK is one telling example. Official tracking of the virus has been almost completely abandoned by the government. Using self-reported data from voluntary participants across the UK (excluding Northern Ireland), the Zoe Health study group estimates that on December 9 there were 182,579 new infections. This *single-day total* is over five times larger than the UK government's official *weekly* tally of 28,830 (including Northern Ireland).

The UK is hardly unique in its near-total destruction of measures to accurately track the virus. In Italy, Spain and Sweden, cases are also only published once a week. The Netherlands publishes case tallies only once every three days.

Countries like France, where case and hospitalization data are published each weekday (but not over the weekend), give an insight into actual conditions in neighboring countries where testing is being more thoroughly suppressed.

On December 9, the seven-day average of 59,138 daily cases is the highest since the summer surge of the virus in France. In the last seven days, hospitalizations

for COVID-19 (6,771) are up 16.4 percent and deaths 20.2 percent (435).

Even in countries like France these figures are highly incomplete. France's current test positivity rate of 28.6 percent indicates a huge undercount. The upfront cost of both PCR and antigen tests and the promotion of complacency toward the virus by the bourgeois media discourage the population from promptly testing for and reporting cases of COVID-19.

While during previous waves the test and trace efforts pursued by health authorities across Europe was far from sufficient to find and isolate all cases, it at least allowed scientists, health officials and members of the public to have a relatively accurate idea of the extent of infection on any given day.

In June 2020, then US President and fascist coup-plotter Donald Trump stated, "if we stop testing right now, we'd have very few cases." While this statement was widely ridiculed on both sides of the Atlantic at the time as the words of a deranged far-right COVID conspiracy theorist, this murderous suggestion in the face of a deadly pandemic has become the *modus operandi* of the European ruling class.

In November 2021, European countries followed the lead of US President Biden and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) by declaring Omicron as a "milder" variant, despite there being no evidence for this assertion. On this anti-scientific basis, new lockdowns were ruled out, and isolation requirements were cut. Over the spring of 2022, this policy was extended to ending even the most limited mask mandates and the drastic reduction in testing.

In the face of another deadly winter surge—and the *ninth* wave since the beginning of the pandemic—European governments not only refuse to take any action against the virus, by deliberately dismantling test infrastructure, they prevent the population from accessing the information necessary to make informed decisions to protect themselves, their families and the wider society. This actively aids COVID-19's spread.

A drastic winter pan-European resurgence confirms once again that the "herd immunity" policy is not only criminal in demanding millions lay down their lives and "live with the virus," but that is also a false concept.

A very high proportion of the European population

has had multiple infections or a three or four vaccine doses, or both. However, due to COVID-19's capacity to evolve extremely quickly under conditions of mass infection, once again a new variant is moving its way through the population.

Adopted by nominally left- and right-wing governments across the continent, the final destruction of measures to track the virus is the logical outcome of all capitalist governments' "herd immunity" policy. That the capitalist system can only respond to the pandemic by a systematic attack on science and truth is a natural consequence of its historical bankruptcy.

Continuous infection and death are not necessary parts of human life. As was shown by the experience in China before world finance capital forced it to open its borders and its population to infection, the elimination of the virus through scientific measures is possible in just a few months.

First and foremost, this requires accurately tracking the spread of COVID-19 through the population, a measure that capitalist governments across Europe have consciously attacked in order to keep as much of the workforce producing profit as possible through the pandemic, irrespective of the risk to their personal health.



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