Respiratory infections rip as Spain's COVID cases rise

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A wave of respiratory infections is rapidly spreading across Spain since the last weeks of 2023. The wave has been dubbed "tripledemia"a combination of infections of three different viruses, COVID-19, Influenza A and RSV, a virus that can cause bronchiolitis that mainly affects children.

The latest report posted January 4 from the Carlos III University Health Institute states that the rate of respiratory infections now stands at a total of 952.9 cases per one hundred thousand inhabitants at national level, 78 percent more than a month ago.

In some regions the figure is much higher. In Castilla La Mancha there are 1,710 cases per hundred thousand and in Valencia it is 1,501.

Spain's hospitals have come under immense pressure, as hospitalisations grew 60 percent in a week. In Madrid, the Hospital Universitario La Paz, which serves a population in excess of 500,000 people and is one of the largest in Spain by the number of beds, has been forced to suspend operations to make room for new patients.

Emergency services are saturated due to the avalanche of patients. The health authorities ask patients not to go to the emergency room and go to primary care centers, which face shortages of doctors after 15 years of spending cuts in the healthcare sector. With the prospect of taking several days or even weeks to be treated, many patients are going directly to the emergency rooms out of desperation.

The situation is becoming especially complicated with the flu, which saw a 75 percent increase in cases in the last week alone. The forecast is that the combination of the cold and Christmas gatherings, which in Spain last until January 6, the day of the Three Magic Kings, means the flu is expected to peak in the third week of January. The same naturally holds true for COVID.

Epidemiological forecasts calculate that at least 4,000 people will die by the end of February.

These viruses are dangerous for a large part of the population, but especially for children and people over 65 years of age, pregnant women, immunosuppressed or those who suffer from other ailments that may make them vulnerable. To this we must add those affected by Long COVID, which according to studies may be around 10 percent of the people who have been infected by COVID and rises with each subsequent infection. In Spain, this would mean around two million people affected.

According to the latest data from the World Health Organization (WHO), COVID infections are on the rise worldwide, with an increase of 52 percent in the last month that is likely greater due to the decrease in reports and the dismantling of monitoring systems.

WHO spokesperson Christian Lindmeier told reporters this amounts to 850,000 new daily cases. The true figure is likely much higher. He stated, "You know that all throughout the world and you've seen it in many of your own countries, the reporting has dropped, the surveillance centers have dropped, the vaccination centers have dropped, have been dismantled as well or shut down".

This is the result of capitalist policies of prioritising profits over lives. Across the world, governments are systematically seeking to hide the spread of COVID and other respiratory viruses by insisting on the non-use of masks, eliminating containment measures and dismantling information and control systems. The anti-vaccine propaganda strongly disseminated by the media is causing the population to vaccinate less, not only against COVID, but also against flu and other diseases.

The spread of respiratory diseases was predictable.

Spain experienced something similar last year, although with less intensity. North America, China and Northern Europe are all experiencing a wave of respiratory infections with hospitals saturated.

Rather than heeding the continued dangers posed by the viruses and recognise the need for billions of euros investment in the depleted healthcare system after 15 years of austerity measures, the new government of the Socialist Party (PSOE) and the Sumar coalition formed by pseudo-leftists and Stalinists is debating whether to introduce the most rudimentary health measures, like masking in health facilities. It has adopted a laissez-faire attitude towards the "tripledemia", six months after it declared the COVID pandemic officially over.

On Tuesday, the government finally mandated minimal measures like mask-wearing in health facilities, after six regions had already imposed this over the past weeks. "We are talking about putting on a mask when you enter a health center and taking it off when you leave," Health Minister Mónica García told *Cadena Ser* radio late Monday. "I don't think it is any drama. It is a basic and simple measure of the first order.'

This is the same García who in December 2021 said that masking was a "useless measure", echoing the worst and dangerous anti-scientific lies.

Instead of contracting more doctors, nurses and other healthcare professionals, the latest proposal of the PSOE-Sumar government is to allow workers themselves to self-diagnose and take sick days without pay and without seeing a doctor. Once again, workers are being abandoned to their fate.

They are pursuing continuing the same criminal and reckless policies of its predecessor, the PSOE-Podemos government (2019-2023), which systematically dismantled some of the most basic facets of public health—testing, contact tracing and reporting of disease outbreaks. According to *The Lancet* calculations, these policies have already cost 162,000 lives in Spain as per excess deaths, even though official data remains at over 122,000.

Meanwhile, the government continues to spend billions of euros on the military and NATO's war against Russia in Ukraine, while showering large banks and corporations with billions from European funds. This is the money that could be used to fund vaccines, therapeutics and the renovation of infrastructure to prevent airborne diseases.

The fight to end the pandemic is inseparable from the struggle by the working class against capitalism and its subordination of everything to the profits of big business. It is to the working class that principled scientists and epidemiologists must turn.

Across Europe, health workers have been at the forefront of opposition to the capitalist offensive against public health care, as the ruling class privatises, dismantles and sacks thousands of staff. In Spain, they have participated in massive strikes to improve their working conditions and the medical care they give to their patients. Last month, 55,000 nurses went on strike in Catalonia against low wages and precarious working conditions.

These strikes have received mass support, with healthcare workers protests being joined by tens of thousands of people like in Madrid in November 2022 when hundreds of thousands demonstrated against the right-wing Popular Party (PP) regional government of Isabel Ayuso.

Their struggles have been constantly betrayed by the trade union bureaucracy, which has refused to organize unified strike actions, instead calling them on different dates and regions. Union leaders have also sought to shut down strikes as soon as they break out, seeking agreements with the different regional governments that include pay raises below workers' demands and do not improve the public healthcare situation.

Workers must join their brothers and sisters internationally. In every school, factory, warehouse and other workplace, they must form rank-and-file safety committees to take up the struggle in defense of the health and well-being of society.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), formed in 2021 in part to organize a working-class movement to stop the COVID-19 pandemic, continues to lead this struggle and fight for all forms of workplace safety.

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