

Massive wave of COVID infections throughout Europe

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The coronavirus pandemic is spreading unchecked across Europe, causing rising death rates and pushing hospitals to their limits.

On January 10, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus stated: “In December, almost 10,000 deaths from COVID-19 were reported to WHO, and the number of hospital admissions increased by 42 percent compared to November with the number of ICU admissions at 62 percent. However, the trends [on mortality] are based on data from fewer than 50 countries, mainly in Europe and the Americas. It is certain that there is also an increase in other countries that is not being reported.”

The current wave is being driven primarily by the JN.1 (Juno) variant. It is an offshoot of BA.2.86 (Pirola). Pirola has more than 20 mutations on its spike protein, Juno has just one more. However, this makes the variant significantly more immune-resistant.

The British Office for National Statistics also recently reported that, in addition to the normal symptoms of a coronavirus infection, Juno can also cause sleep problems and anxiety. According to the survey by British scientists, 10.8 percent of those infected experienced sleep problems and 10.5 percent reported anxiety disorders.

The variant is already occurring in many European countries, including Iceland, Portugal, Spain, France, Germany and the Netherlands. A number of countries in Central and Eastern Europe also reported a significant increase in respiratory illnesses at the end of last year. In Spain and Italy, the rising numbers of patients have pushed hospitals to their limits. The COVID wave also coincides with rising flu and RSV infections across Europe.

In the UK, Juno is causing new record highs. At the end of October, the JN.1 share was still at 1 percent, in

mid-November it was at 5 percent, but by Christmas had risen to 51.4 percent. Professor Steve Griffin, a virologist at Leeds University, said, “There has clearly been a massive surge in COVID infections in recent weeks. This is undoubtedly due to socialising indoors over the festive period. It is also likely that the return to schools, universities and businesses will increase this even further.”

Asked if the UK could set a new record this month, he replied, “Yes, I think we could see something similar to BA2 [the previous record wave].” Data scientist Professor Christina Pagel from University College London also expects infections to rise for another week or two, “equalling” or “even surpassing” the record waves at the beginning of 2020.

In Germany, the number of infections reached a record high at the end of the year, with hospitalisation rates on a par with previous waves. Although the wave receded in the first weeks of January, according to data from Fluweb, the incidence rate remains at 500. Almost 8,000 people had to be hospitalised in the first three weeks of the year and 1,316 have already died.

The situation in Spain is particularly dramatic. Hospitals have been under increasing pressure since the beginning of the year as a result of a “triple-demic” of COVID-19, influenza A and RSV. In large parts of the country, emergency departments are heavily overloaded due to the high volume of patients. The Universitario La Paz hospital in Madrid, which treats around 500,000 patients, making it one of the largest hospitals in Spain, has had to postpone operations to make room for new patients.

Due to the dramatic situation, the Spanish government was forced to reintroduce compulsory masks in healthcare facilities. However, local governments, such as those in the Basque Country,

have reacted by taking legal action against the mask requirement.

The rising number of deaths from flu and COVID-19 is even putting pressure on funeral services. According to an article in Euro Weekly News, funeral service operators are warning they will struggle to cope with the rising number of deaths by the end of January.

Manuel Tejasdas, head of the Interfunerarias funeral service chain in Catalonia, said, “We are overwhelmed. I haven’t seen such an increase in deaths since the pandemic.”

Piles of corpses are also being reported in hospitals in the regions of Madrid and Valencia. “Hospitals are continually calling us to collect bodies and we are very overloaded here,” explains Tejasdas. In some cases, families have to wait up to four days for a funeral. That is twice as long as the usual period of between 24 and 48 hours.

Doctors and local newspapers in Italy are also warning that hospitals could be overwhelmed by the flu and COVID wave. Hundreds of patients are having to wait days to be transferred to normal hospital wards or intensive care units. According to the Italian National Institute of Health (ISS), cases of respiratory infections reached record levels in the last two weeks of 2023, surpassing corresponding periods during the pandemic. At the end of December, the number of deaths peaked at 425 per week, and the figure remained at 371 in the first weeks of January.

Foce, the Italian association of oncologists, cardiologists and haematologists, issued an appeal to the Italian government, warning: “For some weeks now, we have been observing the phenomenon of worsening chaos in our emergency systems. Emergency departments are in a nightmare situation and hospital wards are “under siege.” It continues: “It is clear that the claim made at the end of July that the COVID pandemic is ‘numerically over’ is not true. The virus never disappeared.”

In Portugal, Health Minister Manuel Pizarro also publicly admitted that he was concerned about the increase in admissions to intensive care units as a result of respiratory infections. “The virus is causing very serious illnesses,” he explained. At the beginning of January, there were long waiting times of sometimes more than 10 hours in hospitals across the country.

The massive new coronavirus wave is a direct result

of the ruthless pandemic policy of all European governments. They are putting profits before the lives and health of the population and have long since cancelled all measures to contain the pandemic.

The necessary fight against the pandemic must therefore come from below and be linked to the fight against capitalism and the reorganisation of society on a socialist basis. The only way to stop the pandemic is “a globally-coordinated elimination strategy, in which the entire world’s population acts in solidarity and with a collective determination to enforce a broad-based public health program,” writes the WSWs in its New Year’s perspective.

And further: “After four years of the pandemic, it is abundantly clear that such a global strategy will never arise under world capitalism, which subordinates all public health spending to the insatiable profit interests of a money-mad financial oligarchy. The very idea that an illness should be eliminated or eradicated, a central concept in public health, has been abandoned. Only through world socialist revolution will it be possible to end the pandemic, as well as stop the further descent into capitalist barbarism and World War III.”



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