

# European heatwave threatens the lives of thousands

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Europe is gripped by a major heatwave, with unprecedented temperatures across the continent.

While workers suffer in deadly temperatures made more frequent and severe by climate change, European governments are sabotaging the required reduction in carbon emissions to guard the interests of big business and doing nothing to protect working people and the most vulnerable from the impact of extreme heat.

Record high temperatures of above 46 degrees Celsius (114.8 degrees Fahrenheit) were recorded in Spain and Portugal, with temperatures of 40 degrees C (104 degrees F) recorded across parts of France and Italy—and expected in Germany in the next days as the heatwave moves east.

Red alerts have been declared with major disruptions, including the full or partial closure of 1,350 schools in France. A major wildfire has broken out in the Turkish province of Izmir, forcing the evacuation of tens of thousands, as well as blazes in Greece, Spain and Portugal. In Crete, 1,500 people have been evacuated, and two people were killed in fires in Catalonia, Spain.

The immediate cause of the heatwave is a heat dome, a region of high pressure over a large area which stops hot air coming from the Mediterranean from rising. As more hot air is trapped, it evaporates moisture, raising the humidity and making it harder for the body to lose heat through sweating, increasing the danger to health. Such extreme events are made ever more likely and frequent by global warming, driven by fossil fuel emissions.

It is likely that the heatwave will kill many thousands across the continent. A study published in *Nature Medicine* estimated that there were 47,690 heat-related deaths in Europe in 2023. Statistician Pierre Masselot told *Politico* that this heatwave could kill 4,500 people across Europe just between June 30 and July 3.

Those over 65 years old are particularly vulnerable to heat deaths, as are those forced to work in extreme conditions, particularly outdoors. In Italy a 47-year-old

construction worker died after collapsing from heatstroke at work. A 35-year-old French worker suffered a fatal cardiac arrest on leaving his construction site, and a 10-year-old American girl died after collapsing in the heat at the Palace of Versailles.

The Spanish Workers' Commissions union reported five workers' deaths from heat-related causes in the last three weeks, including an undocumented agricultural worker, a 63-year-old worker in an unventilated warehouse, and a 58-year-old working on a road as day temperatures reached 42 degrees C (107.6 degrees F).

Few legal protections for workers' safety exist, and they are often only on paper. The European Union (EU) sets no maximum temperature limits for safe working, with most national laws allowing work to continue with "mitigations" if unsafe temperature levels are reached.

According to a report by EUROGIP, almost no member states have mandatory temperature limits for outdoor workplaces in the construction, agriculture and logistics industries, with Belgium and Cyprus among the few exceptions who require increased rest in extreme heat and humidity.

The majority of laws around extreme heat leave determining the appropriate mitigation measures up to employers, with workers only permitted to file a report instead of downing tools when it is unsafe to work.

Spanish law requires a reduction in the working day only "on the basis of a report from the Labour and Social Security Inspectorate," which for short but brutal heatwaves like the current one will come too late. Laws in Italy, France, Austria and Luxembourg partially compensate workers if work is stopped because of the heat but only if the *employers* declare the stoppage.

All these laws allow employers to force workers to labour in extreme heat, with the fig leaf of a few mitigations, such as providing drinking water. The lack of concern by capitalist politicians for protecting workers

and the vulnerable from the consequences of climate change echoes the brutal attitude taken towards the COVID-19 pandemic, in which necessary social distancing and lockdown measures were lifted to allow production to restart while the virus ran rampant.

That deadly heatwaves are now the norm every summer demands urgent action, both to implement public health measures to protect lives from the consequences of extreme heat and to reverse the global warming which drives climate change.

Public health measures would include a massive programme of public works and infrastructure, ensuring cool and clean air in all buildings both to protect from heat and the spread of airborne viruses such as COVID-19, and redesigning cities to avoid the “heat island” effect in which heat is trapped in urban areas. A study published in *The Lancet* estimated that increasing the amount of vegetation in cities by 20 to 30 percent could have prevented over a million heat deaths between 2000 and 2019.

As with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, there is no such programme of mitigations, as all public spending is cut back to pay for the rearmament drive of all European governments and the constant enrichment of the financial oligarchy.

Overwhelming scientific evidence points to the role played by increasing greenhouse gas emissions in increasing the frequency and severity of heatwaves. A report from scientists at the World Weather Attribution estimates that half the world’s population—4 billion people—experienced an additional 30 days of extreme heat caused by climate change in the year from May 1, 2024 to May 1, 2025.

Despite the frequently repeated pledges from capitalist governments to cut emissions, the amount of annual CO2 emissions continues to rise every year. Multiple governments have hypocritically affirmed their belief in the need to reverse climate change, while opposing taking the urgent measures required.

Most cynical was the Macron government in France, whose health minister said of the heatwave “climate sceptics have been served: we have clearly seen that there has been a change [in the climate].” Meanwhile, President Macron joined the right-wing governments of Hungary and Poland to demand delays in announcing the EU’s climate targets for 2040, and that any reduction in carbon emissions must be “compatible with our competitiveness.”

The far-right Italian government of Giorgia Meloni has

used similar rhetoric, with its environment minister questioning whether climate change is caused by “a cyclical factor of the earth” and opposing EU climate regulations, as Italy must “defend its national interests.”

The 2040 plan will reportedly allow EU nations to meet some of their targets by paying developing nations to reduce emissions, which environmental groups have criticised for allowing developed nations to divert resources from efforts to reduce their own emissions.

Even the goal of reaching net emissions 90 percent lower than 1990 levels by 2040 is woefully inadequate to prevent global average temperatures from rising to 1.5 degrees C above pre-industrial levels. According to modelling by the Climate Action Tracker, current pledges and targets would lead to an average increase of 2.1 degrees C, and current real-world policies and actions would mean the world was 2.7 degrees C warmer, with calamitous consequences.

Global warming links the interests of workers in Europe with others across the world, where climate change is often creating even more lethal conditions.

In South Asia and Southeast Asia even temperatures of 35 degrees C (95 degrees F) can be deadly as the high humidity makes it difficult to lose body heat through sweat. In the US, two letter carriers died after working in extreme heat while the Trump administration declares open war on both health and safety regulations and climate protection.

The argument that workers must support “their” bourgeoisie in sabotaging the planet so that they can outcompete businesses in other nations is a perverse denial of reality. The working class is inherently international and has no interest in a race to the bottom, which will not only see their wages and working conditions driven down, but it will create unliveable conditions across the whole planet.

Climate change can only be fought through the international struggle for socialism, rejecting the nation-state system in which workers are subordinated to the interests of their capitalist exploiters.



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