

Prison riots erupt as Rome extends coronavirus lockdown to all of Italy

By Alex Lantier
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Late Monday evening, Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte announced the extension of Sunday's partial quarantine orders for northern Italy to the entire country. The decision came after 1,797 new coronavirus cases and 97 deaths from the disease were recorded in Italy, bringing the total to 9,172 cases and 463 deaths—amid a surge of contagion across Europe with 557 new cases in Spain, 203 in France and 184 in Germany.

Conte's announcement came as prison riots exploded across northern Italy after authorities cut off family visitation rights, ostensibly to keep inmates from catching the disease from their families. Inmates' families also protested outside prisons against the authorities' refusal to release prisoners or provide them with any protection from contagion inside overcrowded prisons. The Conte government sent police and army units to violently crack down on the prisoners, killing six.

Reading prepared remarks, Conte said: "The numbers tell us we are having an important growth of infections, of people hospitalized in intensive and sub-intensive care, and unfortunately of the deceased. Our habits therefore need to change. They need to change now. I demand even more stringent, stronger measures immediately. I am about to sign a measure that we can summarize as 'I stay at home.' There will no longer be a red zone on the Italian peninsula. All of Italy will be in the emergency zone."

Authorities are imposing a draconian regime. All Italian schools, universities, museums and large public events are to be closed until April, all travel other than for urgent health- or work-related reasons is banned, and bars and restaurants are only allowed to remain open if they ensure a minimum distance is maintained between all clients.

These measures, which previously applied to 16 million people, are to be extended to Italy's entire 60.5 million population in a desperate attempt to halt the spread of the virus.

The devastation of Italy's health system by decades of European Union (EU) austerity and state authorities' initial, careless response to the coronavirus are having horrific consequences. The speed of the disease's spread is overtaking Conte's inadequate pledges to get €8 billion to fight it, and hospitals are rationing care as they are overflowed with more coronavirus patients in critical condition than they have respirators to keep them alive.

Giorgio, a doctor in Brescia near Milan, told the French daily *Libération* the situation is "terrible, people outside do not realize it." He explained, "Initially when the first few patients arrived, we did not understand how grave the situation was. We greeted them without masks. Since then, we wear them, and with gloves and protective overalls. I live apart from my family. ... But then a few days later, the number of Covid-19 patients exploded. They took over a quarter of the beds, then half, now almost all."

Doctors now tell coronavirus patients to return home and wait to see whether their pneumonia symptoms become severe—that is, requiring a hospital stay for oxygenation or emergency ventilation. Patients in critical condition, who are now flooding hospitals and being put even in hospital corridors, receive emergency antimalarial drugs or antiviral drugs usually prescribed for AIDS. However, approximately 5 percent of patients do not respond to this treatment and require emergency ventilation to survive.

Initially hospitals would treat everyone who developed critical symptoms, Giorgio told *Libération*, but "now, we only send the youngest patients. The

anesthesiologists are asking us not to send them aged patients whom they will unsuccessfully ventilate for 15 to 20 days. Initially, the cut-off was 80 years old. Now, given the deterioration and the seriousness of the situation, it is 70 and anyone with other pathologies.” This provokes opposition from doctors, he noted, but “in practice, directors of hospitals with resources for more intensive care refuse to take our older patients.”

Giorgio said there are one or two deaths each day in his hospital, leading him to ask whether “the number of dead is very greatly under-reported.” He added, “In my ward, there are 11 doctors, two of us have fever. I was tested Tuesday, I have not gotten my result yet. Probably we all have the virus. But we do not have symptoms yet, and given the medical emergency, we must all continue to work.”

These conditions, which trample basic social rights such as the right to medical care and the right to safe working conditions, expose the bankruptcy of capitalism. They are the product of EU policies imposed for decades over opposition in the working class to enrich the Italian and European financial aristocracy. These have stripped public hospitals to the bone and left them unprepared for a major epidemic, nearly two decades after the first 2002-2003 SARS epidemic made clear that coronavirus epidemics pose a major threat.

Aggressive quarantines imposed in China bought time for the rest of the world to prepare for the arrival of the virus, and have largely brought the epidemic under control in China. However, governments across Europe have failed miserably: health staff across the continent were left unprepared and vulnerable to the spread of the disease.

Another population at enormous risk are detainees in prisons or refugee camps. Forty-two prisons in Italy have an overcrowding rate of over 150 percent, leaving inmates desperately vulnerable to a highly contagious, deadly and untreatable disease like the coronavirus.

After Iran released 70,000 inmates in an attempt to prevent the spread of coronavirus in its prisons, prison inmates in at least 27 facilities across the Italian peninsula protested this weekend and yesterday to demand their freedom and the right to see their families. The Italian government responded with a bloody crackdown.

On Saturday, 200 prisoners barricaded themselves on

the roof of a prison in Salerno, near Naples; protests then spread to Poggioreale, Pavia, Frosinone, Vercelli, Alessandria, Foggia, Modena, and beyond. Prisoners in Milan’s San Vittore prison wrote “pardon” on a sheet they waved aloft on the prison’s roof.

Army troops and Carabinieri military police assaulted protesting inmates who tried to flee Saint Anna penitentiary in Modena, at the heart of the zone worst hit by the coronavirus, killing six.

One inmate’s wife wrote to the prisoners’ rights group Antigone to warn: “Should the virus make its way to those cold walls, it would be the end. My husband has health problems, the prison is small and there are twice as many people staying there as it’s made for. One falling ill would be enough to infect the rest of the inmates.”

Others whose loved ones have almost finished their prison sentences appealed for an early release from unsanitary prisons where many diseases are already circulating.

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