

Coronavirus pandemic surges across Europe

By Johannes Stern and Alex Lantier
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Thousands fell ill with coronavirus and hundreds died yesterday in Europe as the pandemic kept surging across the continent. As Italy—the epicenter of the pandemic in Europe—went into a nationwide lockdown aiming to halt the spread, regional quarantines were imposed in Spain, Greece, France and Germany, while the disease also tore through Scandinavia and entered into the Balkans.

Italy recorded 977 new cases and 168 deaths, the largest number in any 24-hour period during the coronavirus epidemic, bringing Italy's health care system to the verge of collapse. The number of cases in Italy stands at 10,149, including 631 deaths, for a current 6.2 percent fatality rate. Multiple airlines including British Airways, Ryanair and Air France halted flights to Italy, while Austria and Slovenia closed their land borders with Italy.

The fatality rate is surging as the disease swamps hospitals, especially in northern Italy. Even with medical staff working 14-hour shifts and freeing up hundreds of beds for coronavirus patients in the most critical condition, requiring artificial ventilation to survive, hospitals still must turn away desperately ill patients. “We are still able to take in the patients with the most serious respiratory problems, but we have to send those with bilateral pneumonia home to be checked by their family doctor,” Guido Marinoni of the Medical Association of Bergamo told *Der Spiegel*.

Noting that “for years the Italian health care system has been cut back, beds reduced, nurses poorly paid,” the news magazine cited Massimo Galli, chief physician at Milan's Luigi Sacco Hospital, who said that virologists, internists and pulmonologists are “urgently needed.” He said, “Anyone who thinks the coronavirus thing is overkill, please come to our department.”

Lombardy's regional health commissioner Giulio Gallera warned, “We can't keep up with another two or three weeks of such a crazy increase in the number of people in emergency rooms and intensive care units,” citing the physical and psychological strain on a doctor who told him: “I will never forget the eyes of the patient I connected to the ventilator this morning.”

With all large public events called off, schools and universities closed, city centers empty, many workers telecommuting, Italy's economy is in freefall. Shoppers cleaned out grocery store shelves, stocking up on food.

Lorenzo Codogno, former chief economist of the Italian Treasury, told Reuters that Italy's average daily gross domestic product (GDP) is running 10 to 15 percent below normal levels, so that Italy will go into a deep recession if a prolonged quarantine is needed to halt the spread of the virus. In the meantime, uncertainty hangs over tens of millions of workers' lives.

Economic Development Minister Stefano Patuanelli has called for a €10 billion bailout, and the ABI banking lobby said that it may suspend mortgage payments for families and businesses impacted by the coronavirus crisis—apparently in an effort to get access to public bailout funds. However, the sum proposed by Patuanelli is completely insufficient. It not only fails to address tens of billions of euros of EU health care cuts imposed over decades, but gives nothing for child care, lost wages, and medical bills to workers facing school closures, recession, and the prospect of mass layoffs.

Mass quarantines are being implemented or prepared across Europe, however, as the spread of the disease threatens to swamp hospital systems across the continent. Greece announced a total, two-week shutdown of day care centers, schools and universities in an attempt to prevent the disease from spreading. Of particular concern was the discovery on March 9 of a coronavirus patient, a 40-year-old woman who had traveled to the Middle East, on the island of Lesbos.

Lesbos, an Aegean Sea island close to Turkey, is the site of the infamous Moria detention camp where tens of thousands of refugees fleeing Middle East wars and poverty are kept in horrific conditions. There is now an imminent danger that this contagious and deadly disease could spread to tens of thousands of refugees, living in poverty and in unsanitary conditions dictated by the EU. There alone, the death toll could easily rise into the thousands.

While France's caseload rose 372 to 1,784, Spain yesterday closed all educational facilities and suspended closed-door events with over 1,000 people in Madrid, La Rioja and the Basque towns of Vitoria and Labastida, as Spain's coronavirus caseload rose 443 to 1,674. There is a growing danger that the coronavirus could also swamp Spain's health care system, which has suffered somewhere between €15 and 21 billion in EU spending cuts since the 2008-2009 crisis.

In Britain, six people died, and 54 new cases tested positive for coronavirus amid mounting concern over the lack of

staffing and resources of the National Health Service. The United Kingdom has only 2.5 beds per 1,000 inhabitants, the second-lowest ratio in Europe, and it is highly vulnerable to being swamped by a rapid rise in the number of cases.

Amid a rapid increase in coronavirus infections throughout Germany and after the first two reported deaths in connection from the virus on Monday, German authorities are beginning to take more drastic and desperate measures.

In the capital Berlin, cultural life is coming to a virtual standstill. Tuesday evening Berlin's Senator for Culture, Klaus Lederer (Left Party), has decided, in agreement with the directors, to cancel all events in the large halls of state theatres, operas and concert halls until the end of the Easter holidays, i.e. until April 19. He also recommended that the large private theaters proceed in this manner.

In the city of Cologne, Lit. Cologne, the largest literature festival in Europe with more than 200 events and over 100,000 visitors over twelve days, has been called off. On the day of the planned opening, the festival was canceled by the city's mayor, Henriette Reker. "In the current situation we must do everything possible to break the chains of infection," she was quoted as saying. "Therefore, against the background of the recommendations of the Federal Minister of Health, I have advised against holding Lit. Cologne at this time."

With four new cases in Saxony-Anhalt, all federal states in Germany are now affected by the coronavirus. Throughout Germany there are now 1,296 laboratory-confirmed cases.

Due to the spread of the virus, six federal states have now banned events with more than 1,000 people: Bavaria (until 10 April), North Rhine-Westphalia (indefinite), Hesse, Thuringia, Lower Saxony, Bremen and Schleswig-Holstein. In Thuringia, even events with more than 500 people must be specially approved. Rhineland-Palatinate, Hesse and Saarland have only recommended to cancel large events.

The Bavarian state government decided on Monday to ban events with more than 1,000 guests. This measure will initially remain in force until Good Friday, but it can be extended. Not only will numerous soccer matches be affected, but also spring festivals and the celebration of the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Dachau concentration camp.

Especially for millions of older citizens, there is an immediate deadly risk. In his daily podcast, the head of the Institute for Virology at the famous Charité in Berlin, Christian Drosten, urged people to protect senior citizens, otherwise up to a quarter of those affected in this age group could die.

This is why such drastic measures as not having contact with one's own grandchildren and restricting social life are appropriate, he explained, calling on parents to explain the situation to younger generations: "We talk to them and tell them 'This is serious'." Social life in this group should even "stop for a few months", said Drosten. He then warned: "And if you don't take this seriously, you have to assume that rates that are in the range of 20 percent, 25 percent of these people

will die."

The alarms coming from health workers stand in stark contrast to the irresponsibility and staggering indifference to human life exhibited by the ruling class. "60 to 70 percent of the people in Germany will become infected with the coronavirus," Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) said during the parliamentary group meeting on Tuesday. According to participants, Merkel's remark provoked a stunned silence in the faction.

There is no reason to accept that two-thirds of the German or European population should catch this disease. Quarantines together with the deployment of massive financial and health care resources to treat the sick can halt the coronavirus. In China, the disease is currently being contained to 80,000 people as the number of new daily cases falls to a few dozen, many of which are now imported from Europe. This indicates the necessity of a coordinated, global mobilization of financial, industrial and scientific resources to stop the disease.

In contrast, if 50 to 60 million Germans acquire the disease before a vaccine can be developed, roughly 20 percent or 10 to 12 million would likely develop critical illness, flooding the health care system and leading to millions of deaths. On an international scale, the losses in human life would be incalculable.

That Merkel can blandly predict such an outcome testifies to the bankruptcy of European capitalism and its austerity agenda. It is critical now to mobilize the working class to fight for the right to care, for full financial and social support for workers and small businesses affected by the pandemic, and for an end to destructive EU austerity. Capitalism is taking humanity towards disaster, and it must be replaced by socialism: the planned, rational and democratic use of global economic resources to satisfy human need, not profit.

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