

Italy's coronavirus epidemic surges as mass layoffs announced

By Allison Smith
12 March 2020

Amid a nationwide lockdown to halt the spread of the virus, 12,462 people in Italy were confirmed infected yesterday with the coronavirus COVID-19—a jump of 2,313 in less than 24 hours. Overall, 1,028 patients are in critical condition, and 827 have died.

Even in relationship to China, the original epicentre of the pandemic, the intensity of the epidemic in Italy is reaching alarming proportions. While China has 56 coronavirus cases per million inhabitants, Italy has 206 cases per million inhabitants and a massive 6 percent death rate. In less than two months 827 people have died, while just over 500 people died of flu in Italy all of last year, making COVID-19 much deadlier.

Italian hospitals are at the breaking point, with severe shortages of negative-pressure isolation rooms designed to contain airborne contaminants, hospital beds, intubators and gloves. Italy's Ambassador to the EU, Maurizio Massari, said Italy has already requested the activation of the European Union mechanism of civil protection for the supply of medical equipment. However, not a single EU country but only China responded to the call for desperately needed medical supplies.

“Certainly this is not a good sign of European solidarity,” Massari commented.

Germany and France have blocked exports of protective medical equipment, while China offered to sell Italy 1,000 lung ventilators, 2 million masks, 20,000 protective suits and 50,000 coronavirus test swabs.

At the same time, devastating stories of the social cost of the virus are emerging. Neapolitan actor Luca Franzese posted a video to his Facebook last Sunday sharing the shocking news that his sister died of the disease after doctors refused to treat her; authorities then took 36 hours to attend to her death. Franzese

fought back tears and anger as he recounted the story. “I’ve had to put myself in self-isolation. ‘I might have the virus. To keep my sister alive, I gave her mouth to mouth resuscitation and no one cared, no one is calling me. We are ruined, Italy has abandoned us.’”

Daniele Macchini, a doctor at Cliniche Humanitas Gavazzeni in Bergamo, provided a graphic account of the stress on medical staff by the vast number of coronavirus patients. “War has literally exploded, and battles are uninterrupted day and night,” he wrote, warning of an “epidemiological disaster” that has “overwhelmed” doctors. “One after the other, these unfortunate people come to the emergency room. They have far from the complications of a flu. Let’s stop saying it’s a bad flu. Doctors are having to choose whom to save, with young and otherwise healthy people the priority for treatment.”

Under these dire conditions, doctors feel unable to live up to the Hippocratic Oath—the physician’s vow to treat the ill to the best of one’s ability and to do no harm.

Amid the nationwide quarantine, Italians are also beginning to experience the economic toll of the crisis, with thousands remanded home with limited or no pay and thousands more required to work but having to pay childcare as all schools in Italy remain closed.

Adding to an already bleak economic outlook, today, Fiat Chrysler, Pirelli tires, Decathlon sports stores and DF Sport Specialists announced they are cutting production or suspending operations across Italy amid the economic downturn caused by the pandemic.

Fiat Chrysler announced it is cutting car production and closing four plants across Italy until at least March 16, “to support the nationwide campaign addressing the Covid-19 crisis and minimize the risk of contagion among employees.” After the facilities reopen, the

company said it will increase space between employees at their workstations, which will require changes to manufacturing processes and lead to lower daily production rates.

After one employee at Pirelli's Settimo Torinese plant tested positive for the virus, the company said it will slow down production over the coming days in order to "make it possible to have a very small number of people in the factory in order to guarantee health conditions of maximum safety." This comes on the heels of Pirelli's announcement that they expected at least €30 million in lost sales due to the coronavirus.

DF Sport Specialists said it is closing all physical stores until further notice, and Decathlon has closed all physical stores until at least March 13, maintaining an online only operation.

None of these companies said whether or not employees would receive full pay during the shutdowns, nor what job cuts are planned.

The announcements came as the European Union (EU) agreed today that €7 billion euros can be diverted from the current Italian budget to the coronavirus and another €18 billion euros will be made available to Italy over a period of time to offset economic losses due to the virus. The government said it will elaborate the plan later this week, but current estimates of health care costs and economic losses due to the virus are expected to be in the trillions of euros, making this sum wholly inadequate.

Additionally, as the virus continues unabated, fears are growing that the current restrictions are not enough to stop the deadly virus, and several regional leaders are calling for a stricter quarantine measures.

Luca Zaia, the governor of Veneto, which includes Venice and other cities affected by the outbreak, said that in order to stop the virus and save the public health system, more draconian measures, including a "total closure," were preferable to "drawing out the agony."

The working class must intervene to demand that all necessary resources be deployed to combat the virus—including purchasing supplies, constructing hospitals and developing a vaccine—and that immediate reparations be made to all citizens impacted by the pandemic. This includes suspension of mortgage payments and utility bills, the payment of back wages and reimbursement for child and elderly care bills.

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