

Europe: Over 520,000 coronavirus cases and almost 38,000 deaths

By Robert Stevens
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European countries, including Spain and the UK, announced record-high daily coronavirus death tolls Thursday. With the 4,199 new deaths yesterday, 37,864 have already perished in Europe. There have been more than 521,000 cases of COVID-19 infections on the continent including 33,661 new cases.

In Spain, 950 died—the third consecutive day of a record high.

In the UK, the death rate has quadrupled in a week. In just four days since Monday, 1,693 coronavirus deaths have been announced—more than were recorded on all days up to March 29. The Department of Health and Social Care reported a record 569 deaths Thursday, taking the total to almost 3,000 (2,921). This was the second consecutive day Boris Johnson's Conservative government announced over 500 deaths. Wednesday's 563 fatalities were a 31 percent increase on the previous day.

With an age range of the latest deaths between 22 and 100 years old, nearly 8 percent (44 people) of yesterday's victims had no known underlying health conditions.

Britain is now showing the terrible daily toll commonplace in Italy and Spain, with the pandemic taking over 13,000 and 10,000 lives in those countries.

The UK infection rate has also shot up, with 4,324 new cases announced Wednesday and 4,244 Thursday. Total infections in the UK stand at 33,718 but are in reality much higher. Hardly any tests were done when the outbreak began, despite months of warnings. Three weeks ago, Johnson announced—as part of attempting to enforce his “herd immunity” policy aimed at infecting everyone in the country with coronavirus—that no systematic testing would be done and that everyone who showed symptoms should self-isolate.

More than 1.7 million people in the UK have likely

caught coronavirus over the past 15 days. Data from the NHS 111 online service revealed that web-based assessments flagged 1,496,651 people as potential carriers; a further 243,543 calls to 111 and the 999 emergency number concluded callers had signs of COVID-19.

It was only after widespread outrage at its social Darwinist policy that the government was forced to pledge that widespread testing would be done. Even now, just 163,194 tests have been completed with yet another promise yesterday of 100,000 a day for the end of April. Only 2,000 of 550,000 National Health Service frontline workers have been tested.

The BBC's head of statistics, Robert Cuffe, commented Thursday, “if that [UK death rate] keeps up, we'd expect to see in the region of a thousand deaths a day by the weekend.” Sky News economist Ed Conway noted that “For the past week or so,” the UK's death rate has “been doubling every three days” and “if the growth rate continued like that, in a week's time there would be 10,000 people dead and the UK would be on a far worse trajectory than Italy.”

An explanation of this steeper curve emerged late yesterday, when NHS England reported that the earliest death in the UK had in fact occurred on February 28, one week earlier than previously reported. In total, six people had died in hospital prior to March 5.

In Italy, 760 died Thursday, taking the total to almost 13,915. Two new studies suggested the true death toll could be significantly higher than reported. The InTwig data analysis firm reveals that while there were 4,500 deaths in the hardest-hit city of Bergamo, the Civil Protection Agency only reported 2,060 deaths. The University of Bergamo, using historical data from the national statistics office compared to current hospital data, showed that deaths in the north of Italy doubled in

the first three weeks of March, compared with the average number of deaths during the same period between 2015 and 2019. The uncounted deaths were mostly elderly victims who were not admitted to hospital and never tested for the virus.

The government welfare assistance website remains down, leaving Italy's most vulnerable unable to receive any COVID-19 scheme for financial support. An estimated 3.3 million Italians work in the black economy and don't qualify for welfare support schemes. Twenty thousand army soldiers are deployed in southern Campania, Puglia and Sicily to patrol the streets amid rising tensions as citizens run out of food and money.

Germany announced 168 new deaths, taking the total to 1,099. After Berlin approved its "coronavirus aid programme"—a bailout worth €600 billion for the banks, corporations and the super-rich—anger among workers is growing. In the past days, health employees in hospitals, nursing homes and workers in businesses vital to the supply of the population's needs have criticised catastrophic and unsafe working conditions.

Truck drivers, airport workers, delivery workers and steelworkers are also voicing opposition. A worker at the Outokumpu stainless steel group in Krefeld, speaking anonymously to the WSWS, said, "We're all angry, feeling betrayed. Even those in risk groups still have to work. An info sheet says they should talk to the company doctor. I did that. He advised me to wash my hands and disinfect myself. But we don't have any disinfectant, or face masks. I use keyboards, telephones, etc."

In France, 4,503 have died following a further 471 fatalities. The figures are significantly higher, as up until yesterday the government only listed the number of people who died in hospital. In addition to the 4,503, it announced Thursday that 884 people had also perished in retirement and care homes, taking the total to 5,387.

Aware of explosive social anger in workplaces, the Stalinist General Confederation of Labour (CGT) has issued an authorization for public sector workers outside the hospitals to strike in April. The CGT is not calling for strike action or opposition to President Emmanuel Macron, but cynically authorizing isolated action by individual workers while the union bureaucracy keeps working with the government to

slash wages and social benefits.

Workers have mounted strikes or walked off the job at Amazon, in supermarkets, in the auto industry and in aeronautics. One worker at an air conditioner manufacturing plant told the press, "This epidemic has woken up a lot of people...now the masks are falling. Usually management manages to calm them down, but today they are seeing that even when it is a matter of life and death, management has no concern for them."

Lockdowns throughout the continent have led to staggering job losses. The *Financial Times* reported Wednesday, "Unemployment is growing much faster than in previous recessions because the measures taken to slow the spread of the virus are felt most severely in low-wage, labour-intensive sectors such as retail, hospitality and other consumer-facing services."

In the UK, more than 1 million people have been forced onto the welfare rolls in just two weeks. Austria reported Wednesday that unemployment now stood at over 12 percent—the highest level since records began in 1946. In Spain, over 900,000 people have been made unemployed since the outbreak began there. In Norway, unemployment has risen from 2.3 percent to 10.4 percent in little over a month. The *Financial Times* noted the government's Labour and Welfare Administration statement that a quarter of tourism and transport workers and almost a fifth of retail workers were now claiming unemployment insurance.

The newspaper reported that in Germany, "some 470,000 companies have applied for government wage subsidies through the 'Kurzarbeit,' or short-hours, programme—almost five times higher than the 100,000 people who used the scheme during the 2008-2009 recession."

Another indication of the devastating impact of the coronavirus on the working class is seen in the map produced by the Catalan regional government in Spain, showing that the virus is six or seven times more prevalent in Barcelona's poorer areas than in wealthier areas.

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