

Unemployment surges in Europe amid COVID-19 pandemic

By Alex Lantier
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Yesterday, as the number of COVID-19 cases worldwide topped one million, 35,520 new cases and 3,964 deaths were confirmed across Europe, for a total of 558,873 cases and 42,070 deaths. Europe, which once boasted of its “social market economy” and world-leading health systems, currently has over 70 percent of the world’s 58,149 COVID-19 deaths and has transmitted the disease to multiple countries in Africa and Latin America, from Algeria to Brazil.

With half of humanity now under lockdown and over 10 million jobs lost in two weeks in the US, Europe faces not only its greatest health crisis since the 1918-1919 Spanish flu epidemic, but its greatest social and economic crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Even based on the incomplete statistics available, over 11 million European workers have lost their jobs in just the last two weeks. In Germany, 470,000 firms have applied for state subsidies for over 2 million laid-off workers, 50 percent more than after the 2008 crash. In France, four million laid-off workers are to receive state subsidies. In Spain, 900,000 workers have been fired outright and 1.84 million are receiving subsidies after layoffs—more in two weeks than in the first 20 weeks after the 2008 crash.

One million Britons have applied for welfare, 800,000 workers have lost jobs in Finland and Norway, and Austrian unemployment has risen 52.5 percent to 545,000 workers, the largest number since World War II.

These statistics leave out Italy, the COVID-19 pandemic’s original epicenter and the country that has faced the longest lockdown due to the pandemic. Rome has neither posted statistics for the number of workers fired nor those laid off and slated to receive state unemployment subsidies. However, when the Italian government’s server to process online applications for unemployment subsidies went live this week, it crashed in barely two hours, overloaded by hundreds of thousands of applications.

The COVID-19 pandemic has thus caused not only the greatest health emergency but the greatest social and economic crisis facing European capitalism since the Great

Depression of the 1930s.

Responsibility for this catastrophe lies not only in the virulence of the coronavirus, but above all in the bankruptcy of European capitalism, torn apart by intractable class and political conflicts. Europe’s health systems, devastated by decades of funding cuts, have suffered a historic collapse. Even with most of its largest economies under lockdown in a desperate attempt to halt the spread of the illness, tearing apart Europe’s economy, the disease has spread so far that thousands of new cases are still being found daily, weeks after the first lock-down began in Italy.

A month ago, South Korea, Iran and Italy were key countries facing spread from the original epicenter in China, with 5,621, 2,922 and 3,809 cases respectively. Other European countries had a few hundred cases. Today, most of South Korea’s 10,062 cases have recovered, after a program of sheltering at home, mass testing of the population, and treatment and isolation of the sick. However, its total has been overtaken not only by Italy (119,827), Spain (117,710), Germany (90,964), France (64,338) and Britain (38,168), but countries with far smaller populations than South Korea.

Even Switzerland (19,606 cases, 591 deaths), Belgium (16,770 cases, 1,143 deaths) and the Netherlands (15,723 cases and 1,487 deaths) have overtaken South Korea’s 174 COVID-19 deaths.

In one early COVID-19 hotspot in Vò, Italy, health staff succeeded in isolating the epidemic by mass sheltering at home, testing, and isolation of the sick. Regional governor Luca Zaia said, “Here there were the first two cases. We tested everyone, even if the ‘experts’ told us this was a mistake: 3,000 tests. We found 66 positives, who we isolated for 14 days, and after that 6 of them were still positive. And that is how we ended it.”

However, European governments all rejected the strategy of mass quarantines, targeted shutdowns of economic production, and mass testing and isolation of the sick adopted in South Korea and in Vò. They rejected such strategies, which require a massive investment in testing equipment, masks, respirators and protective equipment to

be implemented on a larger scale. While the European Central Bank created €750 billion in fresh cash to bail out financial markets amid the COVID-19 pandemic, health systems were left to manage with infrastructure devastated by tens of billions of euros in spending cuts imposed since the 2008 crash.

European authorities dismissed the significance of the outbreak with criminal light-mindedness. Italian Foreign Minister Luigi di Maio dismissed warnings of a COVID-19 pandemic as an “infodemic” designed to harm Italy’s economy with false information. Former French Health Minister Agnès Buzyn, a leading member of France’s ruling party, described the risk of spread of COVID-19 to France as “basically zero.”

It was only after the uncontrolled explosion of COVID-19 cases in Italy provoked wildcat strikes across the country—as workers demanded the right to shelter at home if they worked non-essential jobs—that Rome, followed by other European governments, agreed to a lock-down. A broad movement emerged as workers across Europe and in America walked off the job or protested in an attempt to compel a more rational approach to fighting the pandemic.

This is an international and political fight, however, requiring the unification of the working class in a struggle against the entire European bourgeoisie that is organized independently of the trade union bureaucracies.

Workers’ basic needs cannot be subordinated to political deals between the unions and capitalist governments. Workers sheltering at home must remain on full pay, and those still working in key food and medical industries need safe working conditions. The provision of full and modern care to all the sick requires massive emergency investment in health care and the transformations of factories across the continent into internationally-coordinated public utilities, producing critical medical equipment to fight the pandemic. Enforcement of quarantines should be taken out of the hands of army units and brutal riot police units that pose a clear danger to democratic rights.

Above all, the decision of when workers should return to work cannot be left to capitalist governments that serve as barely disguised dictatorships of the financial aristocracy. As the epidemic continues to escalate out of control across Europe, leading European governments are continuing to push to find fraudulent or unscientific methods to compel workers to return to work to produce profits for the major banks and corporations.

London and Paris are both seizing upon initial research at the Helmholtz Center for Infection Research at Braunschweig, in Germany into antibody tests for the coronavirus. These experimental tests are designed to check whether an individual has developed antibodies to fight the

virus, which would indicate that they have been exposed to the virus and may perhaps be immune to it. However, it remains unknown whether and how long someone testing positive for antibodies would be immune to the virus.

Nevertheless, UK and French officials are calling for the administration of mass antibody tests, after which anyone who tested positive to the virus could be forced back to work.

“We are looking at an immunity certificate,” UK Health Minister Matt Hancock said Thursday. “People who have had the disease have got the antibodies and then have immunity can show that and therefore get back as much as possible to normal life.”

Several of the tests have proven defective, testing positive when an individual has been exposed not to the coronavirus that causes COVID-19, but other more common coronaviruses, many of which cause the common cold. Nevertheless, the British government has bought millions of these tests.

While openly acknowledging that the tests are ineffective, Hancock insisted that the British government would nonetheless continue pressing this policy. “The early results of some of them have not performed well. But we hope the later tests we have got are reliable enough for people to be confident in using,” he said, adding: “That is something we will be doing and will look at, but it is too early in the science ... to be able to put clarity around that.”

Nevertheless, French Prime Minister Édouard Philippe has also announced that antibody tests “will be ready to organize the exit from the shelter-at-home policy,” which the Philippe government has claimed could be in as little as two weeks.

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