

# COVID-19 surges in Spain as government pushes reopening of schools

By Alejandro López  
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The COVID-19 virus is resurgent across Spain and Europe. On Sunday the Ministry of Health confirmed 1,525 new COVID-19 cases had been detected in Spain in the last 24 hours. This was 300 more than Saturday's record-breaking total, the first time daily new cases topped the 1,000 mark since early May, when Spaniards were confined to their homes and even daily walks and exercise were still not allowed.

There are now officially over 500 outbreaks of the virus, though the real number is likely larger. New infections are concentrated in three areas: Aragón, Catalonia and Madrid. However, the incidence of the virus this week has risen in almost all of Spain's 17 regions. Hundreds of thousands of people in various towns and regions have been recommended to remain at home.

In this resurgence, the average age of the infected are younger than in the spring. It has fallen from 60 in March-April, to 45 for men and 41 for women. Data from the last three weeks show that figure is even lower: 36 and 38, respectively.

The political establishment and the media have blamed the youth for this rise, blaming parties and other social gatherings or nightlife that undermine social distancing for the recent surge. María Jesús Montero, the Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government's spokeswoman, sent a message last week to "people who are younger, because some of the outbreaks are linked to the behaviour in nightlife venues or places where a large number of people gather."

However, the main reason for the spread is not risky partying, but the criminal policies of the PSOE-Podemos government.

In May and June, Spain was able to contain the virus due to a strict lockdown imposed to gain control over one of Europe's worst outbreaks, after mass anger erupted at the slow response and a strike wave in major industries erupted in Italy and throughout Europe.

Spain halted all nonessential activity for two weeks and gradually started deescalating. Instead of using this time to rapidly invest in tracers and mass testing, however, the government started lifting measures only in order to open the economy. The aim was to "save" the tourism season, which represents 12 percent of Spain's GDP, so the extraction of profits from the working class could continue unabated.

While the rise in infected youth highlights the need for more testing and contact tracing, especially as many seem to be asymptomatic, the government ignored the issue. According to data collected by daily *El País* from the regional authorities, only 3,500 contact tracers have been hired, though international health authorities recommended Spain hire at least 8,000 to control the COVID-19 pandemic.

Amid this resurgence, the Spanish political establishment is promoting a campaign to reopen schools across Spain in September—as are Britain, France, Germany and other countries across Europe. Most have been closed since mid-March. This threatens to further escalate the soaring levels of COVID-19 infections.

The return to school is a criminal policy exposing children, teachers, families and neighbourhoods open to serious illness and death. It has nothing to do with concern for children. Teachers and children are being sent into unsafe environments that will become breeding grounds for COVID-19. It is the other side of the coin of the back-to-work policy of the ruling class. The back-to-school entails sending children to be kept in confined spaces so millions of parents can be sent to work in nonessential industries.

A hasty reopening of schools has been singled out as a key factor behind the catastrophic resurgence in South Africa and Israel. Israel had 6,800 students of various ages and teachers in quarantine in early July, just two weeks after the centres reopened. South Africa has closed its schools for four weeks to limit the spread, but will once again reopen.

In Spain, testament to the criminality of this policy is the fact that they have yet to plan the reopening of schools. Last Wednesday, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez announced in parliament that he would call a conference with all the regional premiers at the end of August to finalise the "back to school."

He said, "We have to meet at the end of August to prepare or finalize, rather, the return to school of our sons and our daughters, I think that is also very important." Education Minister Isabel Celáa put the whole responsibility on the regions, stating that they "must provide the measures and establish a provision of the spaces that allow the distances to be observed."

At this stage, the only guidance the government has given for

the reopening of schools this September was posted in June. The guidance even goes against the general COVID-19 precautions. Social distancing requirements have been reduced from 2 metres to 1.5 metres, while those aged 10 and younger will not be required to social distance or wear a mask in school. Older children will only need to wear masks when the 1.5-meter distance cannot be maintained.

Recommended class capacity has been set at 15, but could be a maximum as 20. However, due to the EU-backed austerity policies implemented by successive right-wing and Socialist Party-led governments, average class sizes are 25 in primary and 35 in secondary education in Spain.

Educators are also expected to use available areas throughout the school area to ensure the latest safety guidelines can be met, including cafeterias and gyms. Classes will supposedly be aired out after each use and windows in classrooms will need to remain open as long as possible throughout the day, even amid cold weather.

Directors of each school will also nominate one staff person responsible to establish a health protocol for each centre. How teaching staff without medical qualifications will be able to differentiate COVID symptoms from others like the flu is also unclear.

The recklessness reopening of schools is provoking growing opposition amongst parents, educators and working people.

Raimundo de los Reyes, director of a Murcian institute and president of Fedadi, the largest association of directors of secondary schools in Spain, told eldiario.es: “They tell us that there should be no meetings of more than 15 people, but they plan a return to class with 35 students in 50 square metres.”

In Galicia, protests have been taking place since last Wednesday, when hundreds of teachers surrounded the regional Education Ministry in a human chain.

In Andalusia, 150 centres have sent a letter to the Ministry of Education rejecting instructions that they write a protocol explaining that they cannot open their doors under current conditions and with the current means.

In Castilla y León, the León Teaching Personnel Board and the parents federation issued a statement criticising Ministry of Education officials for “washing their hands” of the pandemic and “turning over responsibilities to the schools.”

Teachers must be warned, moreover, that the unions do not oppose reopening the schools. They aim to isolate teachers region by region and channel their opposition into empty protests. Just as the unions were the chief enforcers of the reckless back-to-work policy implemented by the PSOE-Podemos government that provoked the resurgence of the virus, now they are also key implementers of the back-to-school policy.

Education workers and parents must act independently by forming action committees to ensure the safety and well-being of children, staff, families and communities. Rank-and-file action committees must do everything possible to ensure the

maximum safety and well-being of children.

The International Committee of the Fourth International and its affiliated Socialist Equality parties throughout Europe propose the following demands as a basis for waging such a fight:

- • Schools must remain closed for all pupils to prevent the spread of COVID-19 until scientific advice establishes that it is safe to reopen. Any teacher refusing to work for health reasons, related to themselves or their family, must be provided a full wage and protected from victimisation.
- • Adequate personal protective equipment must be provided, regular deep cleaning carried out and all activities risk-assessed to protect staff and children from cross infection, and maintain social distancing. Staff must be involved in the drawing up of these measures through elected representatives.
- • All cases of COVID-19 must be immediately reported to staff and families and affected schools closed until testing and contact tracing establishes that it is safe to reopen.
- • Vulnerable staff must have the right not to return to work without any loss of pay or disciplinary action.
- • Casual staff who could not to work and did not receive income during the lockdown must receive full back pay. They must be defended against schools’ demands that they cover for teachers who refuse to work in unsafe conditions.
- • Free, high-quality computer and internet access must be guaranteed to every family, to ensure that accessibility to online learning is not dependent on wealth.
- • A massive increase in government funding must be advanced to overcome the gutting of educational services.

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