

“Practically all children, one way or another, will be infected”

Spanish government demands schools reopen as COVID-19 deaths surge

By Alice Summers
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The Spanish government’s politically criminal decision to reopen schools amid a massive wave of COVID-19 infections will lead to countless unnecessary deaths. Both ruling parties, the “left populist” Podemos and the social-democratic Socialist Party (PSOE), are acting with complete indifference to the health and lives of millions of teachers, children and their families.

Spain remains the epicentre of the coronavirus resurgence in Western Europe. This weekend, the country reached a grim milestone, passing half a million infections after recording 26,560 new cases between Friday and Sunday. The official tally now stands at 543,379. Friday also saw 184 new deaths, the highest number of daily fatalities since the end of May. While the manipulated official death toll stands at 29,516, analyses by major newspapers indicate that at least 45,000 people have died of the virus in Spain.

The ruling class is gloating, however, that the school re-openings will allow them to implement its fascistic “herd immunity” policy—allowing the virus to run its course through the population with no regard for the death and destruction that will follow.

On Wednesday, the right-wing regional premier of Madrid, Isabel Ayuso, told Es Radio: “It is likely that practically all children, one way or another, will be infected with coronavirus.”

Ayuso made clear her contempt to the fate of schoolchildren and their families. “Perhaps they will become infected over the weekend at a family meeting,” she stated dismissively, “or in the afternoon in the park or catch it from a classmate. We just don’t know, because the virus can be anywhere.” Nevertheless, she stressed “children must return to school,” to “be with children of their own age,” get back to “their routines,” and “be socialised.”

Aware of explosive opposition among teachers and parents, Ayuso arrogantly demanded that there be “no strikes or threats,” claiming that “This is not the time for ‘me, me, me’” from workers.

Ayuso’s fascistic rant is, however, the key to understanding the policy of the PSOE-Podemos government. Speaking to the daily *El País*, PSOE Education Minister Isabel Celaá parroted anti-scientific, discredited claims that opening schools will not lead to an increase in infections. “Today it is being established in the field of science that closing schools does not bring any benefit to the evolution of the pandemic in terms of the reduction of cases,” she stated. “And the benefits of school are far greater than the risks. ...”

In a separate interview with Radio Nacional de España (RNE), Celaá declared that for children, “the safest place is at school,” insisting that school re-opening will go ahead as planned against all scientific evidence and popular opposition.

“As long as there is no uncontrolled transmission,” she stated, “which will have to be determined by the Ministry of Health, schools must remain open because we are all living with the pandemic.”

On this basis, the PSOE-Podemos government is threatening to sue all parents who do not send their children to school to be infected with COVID-19. The Attorney General’s office announced on Thursday that it will initiate “criminal proceedings” against any parent of a child aged 6 to 16 who does not attend school. It declared that in-person school attendance is an “inescapable obligation,” accusing parents who wish to keep their children at home of neglect.

It threatened that parental “voluntary, unjustified and persistent neglect will lead to legal consequences stemming from their failure to fulfil the inherent duties of

parental authority.”

The PSOE-Podemos government is acting with open contempt for the lives and health of teachers as well as of students and their families.

Ayuso’s prediction that almost all Spanish children will contract COVID-19 testifies to a staggering contempt for the health and lives of not only their parents and older relatives, who more often contract deadly forms of the illness, but also of the children themselves. It is now scientifically documented that COVID-19 can frequently cause serious and lasting heart damage and diseases such as Kawasaki’s syndrome in children.

Moreover, Spain has one of the highest proportions of older teachers in Western Europe, with 38.2 percent of teachers over 50 and with an average age of 46. There are 22,127 teachers over age 60 in Spain (nearly 5 percent of all education workers); nearly 2,000 of these are over 65. Thousands of educators are therefore being put in severe risk, as individuals above 60 are known to be one of the groups most vulnerable to dying of coronavirus.

The virus is spreading rapidly across Spain. In an indication of the widespread community transmission in Spain, between 2,000 and 2,500 of the 67,000 educators tested (over 3.5 percent) came back with a positive antibody test. Those with a positive result now must be checked to ascertain whether they remain infectious.

Limited measures that have been announced in some of Spain’s 17 regions, such as reducing class sizes, requiring children over age six to wear masks, and implementing social distancing measures, are derisory on the face of it, and in many cases have not even been implemented.

Last week, Ayuso announced at the 11th hour that all teachers in the Madrid region should undergo a coronavirus antibody test before the start of term. Educators were summoned by e-mail on less than 24 hours’ notice to undergo testing, leading to chaotic scenes of thousands of people queuing on the streets of Madrid, with social distancing measures all but impossible.

On Saturday, it was announced that 30 percent of classrooms in Catalan primary schools have as yet failed to meet class-size reduction policies, less than a week before schools are set to reopen. The government of Catalonia had pledged that no more than 20 pupils would be allowed in each classroom, but this ratio, in itself insufficient to prevent the spread of the virus, has not been met in many public schools. There is no pupil limit at all for secondary school classrooms.

The Association of Families for a Safe Education

Choice, a Catalan-based parents’ group, condemned the Catalan government for the lack of safety measures in schools, denouncing them for “turning education centres into slaughterhouses.” Schools, the Association declared, “are the ideal setting for a new general outbreak in terms of public health,” with the “use of masks serving no purpose at all in enclosed, restricted spaces, without ventilation or cleaning equipment.”

Around 39,000 more teachers will be needed across the country to keep to the Ministry of Education’s recommendation that class sizes should not exceed 20 children, according to Spain’s regional governments. The Workers Commissions (CCOO) union estimates this figure to be around 70,000. Many regions are far from reaching these hiring requirements.

In an early indication of the disaster which is about to sweep across Spain as schools reopen, one nursery in Seville, in the province of Andalucía, has already been forced to close after a staff member tested positive. Sixty infants between the ages of zero and three who attended the nursery must now self-isolate at home.

Parents who cannot work or bring in an income while their children are quarantining will receive nothing from the state. Despite previously pledging to cover sick leave costs for parents staying at home to care for quarantining or infected children, PSOE Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez has now backtracked, declaring that parents would have to rely on existing unpaid sick leave programmes.

On Friday, Sánchez declared that “there is no zero risk” with opening schools, but that he wanted to convey a message of “reasonable safety” to educators. Spain’s 17 autonomous regions must not close schools “unilaterally,” he stated, whatever the public health dangers.

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