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WHO warns: Government policies will make half of Europeans catch COVID-19

Yesterday, the World Health Organization-Europe bluntly warned of the catastrophic consequences of European governments' policy of loosening health protocols and self-isolation guidelines, amid a massive surge of COVID-19 driven by the Omicron variant.

WHO-Europe Director Dr. Hans Kluge said the Omicron variant “represents a new west-to-east tidal wave” spreading across Europe. The first week of 2022, he noted, saw 7 million cases in the 53 countries in the WHO's European region: the British Isles, Scandinavia, the European Union (EU) and the countries of the former Soviet Union. He added, “As of 10 January, 26 countries report that over 1 percent of their population is catching COVID-19 each week. ... [Omicron is] quickly becoming the dominant virus in western Europe and is now spreading in the Balkans.

“At this rate, the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) forecasts that more than 50 percent of the population in the region will be infected in the next 6 to 8 weeks,” Kluge warned. With the WHO-Europe region having well over 800 million people, this means a staggering 400 million cases of COVID-19 in Europe alone.



Shoppers walk down Oxford Street, Europe's busiest shopping street, in London, Dec. 23, 2021. (AP Photo/Frank Augstein, File)

The working class faces a cataclysmic health emergency, driven by an irresponsible ruling class that opposes any attempt to control the pandemic as an intolerable restriction on profits. Already, over 1.6 million people have died of COVID-19, and millions are suffering from Long COVID in the WHO-Europe region. Yet European governments are preparing a catastrophe, with a new wave of mass death and debilitating disease flowing from an unprecedented surge in infection.

To date, Europe has seen approximately 100 million confirmed cases of COVID-19. Now, the WHO is warning that in just the next two months, there will be four times more cases than in the entire pandemic until now.

These figures are so vast that they almost defy understanding. With between 10 and 50 percent of COVID-19 patients suffering from Long COVID, depending on the definition used for it, this means tens or hundreds of millions of people in Europe will be suffering debilitating long-term illness requiring labor intensive care. This would stagger society, as vast numbers of people could not work due to illness, and lead to widespread severe illness and death.

European governments falsely claim that vaccinations have “broken the correlation,” in the words of French Health Minister Olivier Véran, between infections and serious illness and death.

In fact, such a massive Omicron wave would swamp hospitals that already are stretched to the breaking point. Now, even before the most recently infected cases arrive in hospitals, 23,371 of 3.4 million active cases are hospitalized, and 3,969 are on life support in France, a country with a relatively high vaccination rate of 74.9 percent. If similar proportions applied to the WHO’s projections, this would mean nearly 3 million patients requiring hospitalization and 500,000 on life support in the next two months in Europe.

This alone would likely be beyond the capacity of European hospitals, leading to a surge in deaths as COVID-19 or other patients could not obtain care in overburdened facilities. However, everything indicates that the crisis would in fact be even more serious.

Polish medical adviser Andrzej Horban warned in the *Rzeczpospolita* newspaper of a “tsunami of infected people.” The 12 million unvaccinated Poles will “all be infected with the new variant,” he said, and with 5 to 10 percent of them needing hospital care, Poland would have “to treat around 1 million people.” Even if they did not all come in at once but “over the course of a few months,” he added, this would hopelessly overburden hospitals. “We probably would need 50-60,000 COVID beds. And I’m not even talking about where we would find doctors and other medical personnel.”

Similarly, the WHO’s Kluge warned: “I am also deeply concerned that as the variant moves east, we have yet to see its full impact in countries where levels of vaccination uptake are lower, and where we will see more severe disease in the unvaccinated.” He also expressed his concern for the impact on the health care staff, calling “for more support for their mental health and well-being.”

WHO-Europe Senior Emergency Officer Dr. Catherine Smallwood warned against the relaxing of health measures now underway. She said, “We’re yet to see how Omicron will pan out in a situation where there are more people [unvaccinated against] SARS-CoV-2. And that’s where we need to hold our guns, be very cautious and not jump to any conclusions about changing the strategy and letting COVID spread.”

The WHO's horrific projections do not have to come to pass. A strict lockdown to halt transmission, followed by vaccinations and contact tracing to isolate the sick and prevent the virus from spreading, can eliminate transmission of the virus. However, imposing such a policy requires the independent political mobilization of the working class against the utterly reckless policies of Europe's capitalist governments.

The ruling class is responding to the explosive spread of Omicron by doubling down on its contagion policy that openly puts capitalist profit interests ahead of the health and lives of millions.

Governments across Europe are shortening quarantine periods for people infected with or exposed to the virus. A week ago Sunday, the French government announced that COVID-19 patients would be isolated for at most seven days and could return to work after five days if their viral load escapes detection in unreliable antigen tests. The UK and Spain previously launched similar regulations.

Denmark no longer has even a minimum number of quarantine days after infection. After 48 symptom-free hours, people can return to work. This anti-scientific policy results in vast numbers of sick, infectious people returning to infect their colleagues.

On Friday, the German government announced that it was reducing the quarantine period in Germany to just 5-7 days (previously 14). Acting Berlin Mayor Franziska Giffey (SPD) said: "We have committed to keeping schools open. ... People need good child care so they can go about their business, and that's why it's important that we keep schools open."

European governments are responding to Omicron by dropping even the last pretense that they want to prevent the spread of the virus. On Monday, French Prime Minister Jean Castex announced a simplification of school health protocols: If a positive case is reported in a class, parents will no longer have to pick children up at the middle of the day, but only at the end. Castex baldly stated that his government will keep schools and nonessential production open, whatever the cost in lives. He said, "We are not closing the schools or the country."

The Spanish government has called for a change reporting and self-isolating protocols so as to treat COVID-19 like the flu. "It's a necessary debate. Science has given us the

answer to protect ourselves,” Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez told radio station Cadena Ser on Tuesday. “We have to evaluate the evolution of COVID-19 from pandemic to an endemic illness.”

Such statements testify to a toxic political atmosphere that prevails in a ruling class that is callously indifferent to the deaths of millions. It is urgent to mobilize growing opposition in the working class internationally in a movement to impose a scientific policy to eliminate the spread of the virus and take control of the resources of the world economy out of the hands of an irresponsible financial aristocracy.

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