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China locks down Shanghai and Shenzhen as Omicron BA.2 subvariant surges

Outbreaks of the highly transmissible Omicron BA.2 coronavirus subvariant surged across China over the weekend. According to the National Health Commission, there were 1,938 new confirmed cases of infection on Saturday across 31 provinces. The vast majority of cases, 1,421, were detected in the northeastern province of Jilin. Media reports indicate that the case count nearly doubled to just under 3,400 on Sunday.

In response, Chinese authorities have initiated emergency measures to contain the spread of the virus, including mass testing, contact tracing and lockdowns. Residents of Jilin City have undergone six rounds of testing, according to local officials. The neighboring city of Changchun, home to 9 million residents and China's largest automobile producer, has been put into lockdown. The mayors of both Jilin City and Changchun have been fired in the wake of the virus' spread, the largest outbreak in China since February 2020.

Lockdowns, including the closure of schools, workplaces and nonessential businesses, have also been implemented in Shanghai, home to 25 million people and one of the world's largest ports, where 64 cases were detected in one day. In Shenzhen, located on China's border with Hong Kong, its 18 million residents went into lockdown after 60 infections were detected.

These lockdowns, part of China's "Zero COVID" public health policy, have been denounced by the Western media as "draconian" (the Associated Press). Other outlets have been more reserved, such as the *Guardian*, calling the effort "challenging." All only

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acknowledge in passing that, in pursuing such a scientifically guided policy to fight the pandemic, China has only suffered 4,636 coronavirus deaths since December 2019, and only four deaths since April 2020.



Visitors line up outside an office building that was closed off after a case of coronavirus was detected on Sunday, March 13, 2022, in Beijing. The number of new coronavirus cases in an outbreak in China's northeast tripled Sunday and authorities responded with protective measures. (AP Photo/Ng Han Guan)

Nor does the Western media note that previous lockdowns have proven successful. Outbreaks of Omicron earlier this year in Tianjin, population 14 million, and Xi'an, population 13 million, were successfully contained through such stringent measures. It does not require political agreement with the Stalinist government in Beijing to acknowledge these facts.

There is concern within China, however, among both the population and public officials, that even the immense public health measures that currently exist will falter in the face of the virulence of the BA.2 subvariant. At a press conference Sunday, Lin Hancheng, a public health official in Shenzhen, warned, "If the prevention and control is not strengthened in time and decisively, it is easy to cause large-scale transmission in the community and a rapid increase in cases."



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Hancheng then called on the city’s populace to “do a good job in personal protection such as wearing masks, washing hands frequently, ventilating more, disinfecting frequently, and maintaining social distancing, actively cooperate with nucleic acid testing, make every effort to block the risk of epidemic transmission.”

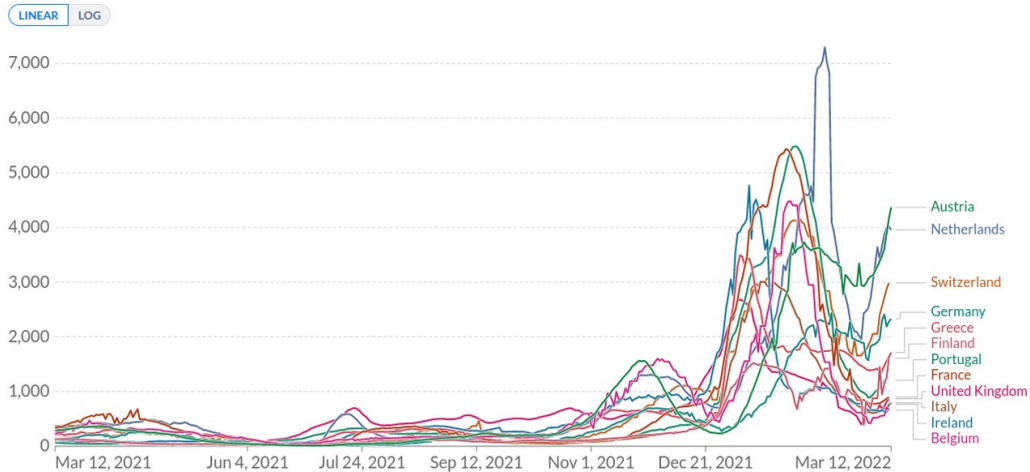
The danger of lifting the Zero COVID policy in China has been demonstrated in Hong Kong. At the start of the year, there had only been 13,000 confirmed cases in total in the Special Administration Region. Restrictions were lifted just as Omicron and BA.2 hit the city, causing total cases to skyrocket to more than 706,000 in less than three months. Total deaths have shot up from 213 to 3,993, with the city attaining the highest per capita daily death rate in the world.

If such an approach were taken across China, millions would be infected within weeks and tens of thousands would be dead.

The Omicron BA.2 subvariant has also begun surging across Europe. Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Switzerland and the United Kingdom have all seen sharp upturns in their daily confirmed COVID-19 case counts, many just weeks after experiencing a surge of the Omicron BA.1 subvariant. There are currently more than 63,000 daily new cases in France, nearly 68,000 daily new cases in the Netherlands, and at least 186,000 daily new cases in Germany.

Daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases per million people

7-day rolling average. Due to limited testing, the number of confirmed cases is lower than the true number of infections.



Hospitalizations in Europe are also on the rise, indicating that serious illness from BA.2 has already begun to take hold among those infected and that it is only a matter of time before another wave of deaths begins. Daily deaths across Europe currently stand at around 1,500 deaths each day.

In countries where the BA.2 wave has seemingly peaked, such as Denmark, test positivity rates and deaths are still rising, indicating that their surveillance system is inadequate for knowing the true spread of the virus.

The stark difference in the evolution of the pandemic in China and Europe is a consequence of the complete surrender to the pandemic by the capitalist European governments. All restrictions aimed at preventing the spread of the disease ended in Britain on March 2. The German government is slated to end all mask mandates by March 20. In France, one negative test just two days after COVID-19 exposure is sufficient to exit isolation. In Spain, the Socialist Party-Podemos government has effectively declared the pandemic over, despite hundreds of deaths each week.

Such policies are directly responsible for the 1.7 million official COVID-19 deaths in Europe since the start of the pandemic. A recent study on excess deaths published in the *Lancet* show that the true number of deaths caused by the pandemic in Europe is likely closer to 3.2 million. It remains unclear how many millions or tens of millions of patients across the continent had or continue to suffer from Long COVID symptoms, including potentially lifelong heart, lung and brain damage.

The rapid spread of BA.2 in Europe is also a warning for workers and youth in the United States, where there have been more than 81 million confirmed COVID-19 cases and nearly 1 million official deaths. While the first wave of Omicron in December, January and February has largely died down, data indicates that the descent has plateaued and cases of BA.2 are now on the rise.

Despite knowing that the next surge of the pandemic is just around the corner, the Biden administration has abandoned all public health measures. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) now only recommend masking when hospitalizations, not cases, are rising, which will allow the pandemic to spread for weeks before any action will be taken. Critical data such as centralized death reporting has been ended.

Nearly 200,000 people in the US have died from COVID-19 since mid-November and the start of the first Omicron wave. The policies of Biden and his advisors are setting up the American working class for an even greater tide of death.

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