

Spain's PSOE-Podemos government defends “herd immunity” policy in the *Lancet*

Alice Summers
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At the start of December, as COVID-19 ravaged Spain, Fernando Simón, a top health official of the Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government, wrote to the medical journal the *Lancet* defending his government's politically criminal handling of the pandemic.

The signatories included Simón, the director of the Centre for the Coordination of Health Alerts and Emergencies (CCAES), his deputy María José Sierra Moros, and 11 other signatories from the CCAES.

The letter bemoans the fact that an “earlier start to the second COVID-19 epidemic wave in Spain compared with other European countries has raised overt criticism [of the] public health administrations' response.” It seeks to dispel these criticisms, referring to the increased “response capacities” Spain supposedly developed after the first wave of the pandemic.

Simón's apologia came as coronavirus cases surged once again, after a month in which positive test rates had been on the decline. After reaching a peak of roughly 25,000 daily infections in early November, positive cases fell to around 7,000 a day by the start of December, before sharply rising again over the last two weeks as limited restrictions were largely abandoned in the run-up to Christmas.

Spain is now the ninth-worst affected country in the world by officially recorded infection numbers, and tenth by total fatalities, with 1.8 million positive cases and 48,926 deaths. Across the globe, Spain ranks eighth for deaths per capita, with 104.71 fatalities per 100,000 people, according to John Hopkins University—roughly one death for every thousand inhabitants of Spain.

Alarmed at the growing political radicalisation produced by the pandemic, Simón's letter is an abject attempt to cover up the government's responsibility for the tens of thousands of deaths. The letter dishonestly asserts that “Spain greatly increased its response capacities after the first wave of this virus.”

“All strategies and protocols were integrated into an updated early response plan,” it continues, “... including provisions for increasing epidemiological surveillance, test-trace-isolate procedures, strategic reserves, and health-care capacity, among others, which was adopted in July.”

Simón's self-congratulatory reference to measures introduced after the first wave of the pandemic sidesteps the contagion which ravaged Spain in the early months of 2020 and the consequent appalling loss of life. Hospitals were overwhelmed by the onslaught of the virus, as the elderly were left to die in care homes and morgues were overflowing with COVID-19 victims.

According to the government's own figures, roughly 29,000 people died of the virus in the first five months of 2020 alone. These figures only include those who died after testing positive for the virus. With systematic coronavirus testing largely unavailable at the start of the pandemic, they are a significant and deliberate underestimate of the true scale of the catastrophe.

In fact, according to Spain's National Institute of Statistics (INE), 45,684 people died from suspected or confirmed COVID-19 in the first wave of the pandemic alone, most between March and May this year.

INE data also revealed that a further 4,218 fatalities occurred during this period in which coronavirus was not the primary cause, but nonetheless contributed to death as a comorbidity. These include people who had suffered from conditions like cancer and ultimately died from complications linked to the coronavirus.

Taken together, these figures indicate that around 50,000 deaths can be linked to COVID-19 in the first five months of 2020 alone. This makes the virus the leading cause of death in Spain in this period. INE data shows it killed as many people in Spain as all types of cancers combined, caused twice as many deaths as respiratory diseases and roughly seven times the number of fatalities as those caused by external events such as murders, traffic

accidents, suicides and accidental deaths.

As to the suggestion that Spain's response since the first wave has been exemplary, this year the country suffered its deadliest autumn in over four decades. Across the months of September, October and November, Spain recorded over 110,000 deaths from any cause, the most fatalities in this period since consistent records began in 1975, with the end of the Franco regime. Spain has never registered more than 100,000 deaths in this period in the 45 years since the transition to democracy.

In fact, according to figures from state Mortality Monitoring System, of the 30 days with the highest total mortality since 1975, 28 of them have been during the coronavirus pandemic. Figures from the INE also show that across the year there have been over 75,000 "excess deaths" in Spain, compared to the average yearly deaths recorded across the 2016–19 period.

This is the direct product of the government's refusal to enact any serious measures to contain the second wave of the pandemic. In early November, in a press conference for the Ministry of Health, Simón made this criminal policy clear: "What we have right now in Spain is not a [stay-at-home] lock-down, and this will probably not be necessary."

He continued: "If we carry out a real and full confinement and nobody leaves their house for any reason, within around 15 days we would have this under control, or perhaps within a month. But this is impossible. There are people who need to work, to buy things, who need to leave... Total confinement is impossible."

Simón's December letter also praised the "[e]xtensive and transparent information for daily epidemic monitoring" made available by the Spanish government, which is "based on exhaustive individual case information received daily at the national level."

Like those reported by its counterparts across Europe, Spanish government figures have been far from "exhaustive" and "transparent." In fact, official statistics undercount total fatalities by a margin of tens of thousands. The government reports a total death toll of 29,000 in the first wave of the pandemic, against the roughly 50,000 fatalities estimated by the INE. While the INE puts excess deaths at over 75,000 in 2020, the PSOE-Podemos government acknowledged a total COVID-19 death toll of roughly 50,000.

Regional governments also obscured the scale of the catastrophe. Reports emerged in October that the Madrid regional government was tampering with daily figures. It omitted thousands of cases from its daily tallies, before

retroactively modifying the infection figures as much as a fortnight later, without notifying the public.

Also, in October, professionals from Catalan research centres and the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research in Germany, wrote to the *Lancet* criticising the Spanish government for failing to provide detailed data on the pandemic, broken down by age, sex and area. "In Spain," the letter stated, "COVID-19 data currently published at the country and regional levels are insufficient to understand the dynamics of COVID-19 and to take action."

Later in his December letter, Simón admits: "However, weaknesses persist in the system, with chronic underinvestment in primary health care, public health, digitalisation, research and innovation, bureaucratic procedures, and with little availability of trained professionals." Simón avoids mentioning that these "weaknesses" are the result of austerity policies pursued over decades by governments across the political spectrum, leaving Spain woefully ill-prepared to face the COVID-19 pandemic.

Concluding his letter, Simón attempts to shift the blame for Spain's massive death toll onto the working class, claiming that the government's failure to stem the pandemic is in fact due to the population's "pandemic fatigue."

"Politicisation and an unfortunate climate of confrontation permeating different sectors," he writes, "makes effective crisis communication challenging and is likely to impair response efforts." That is, the widespread, legitimate anger in the working class at a murderous "herd immunity" policy will not be tolerated. On this basis, earlier this year, the PSOE-Podemos government sent riot police to assault steelworkers striking for the right to shelter at home.

The letter to the *Lancet* is a foul attempt to let the PSOE-Podemos government off the hook for a criminal policy it has pursued.



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