

Spain passes two million coronavirus cases as infection rates surge

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Coronavirus cases and deaths are once again rapidly rising in Spain. After a brief lull in new daily infections in late November and early December, the holidays saw a renewed surge, with cases returning to levels last seen at the height of the second wave in late October.

Last Thursday, Spain passed the grim threshold of 2 million coronavirus cases, recording 42,360 new infections since Tuesday. Wednesday, 6 January is a public holiday in Spain, so case figures were not announced on this day. Over 25,000 new infections were recorded on Friday—the second highest figure of the whole pandemic. As of that day, Spain had officially registered a total of 2,050,360 cases and 51,874 COVID-19 deaths.

Public broadcaster RTVE reported that a staggering 8 percent of all residents in care homes for the elderly died of confirmed or suspected COVID-19 in 2020. This is 24,933 of the 312,753 who had been living in these facilities last year. These deaths make up around half of all recorded coronavirus fatalities in Spain, as these homes became killing fields due to the Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government's inadequate measures to contain the contagion.

Also on Friday, government figures showed that the accumulated incidence rate per 100,000 people had risen to 350.48—a rapid increase from 321 a day earlier. This figure has nearly doubled in a month, having stood at 180-190 per 100,000 in early December.

In the western region of Extremadura, this indicator shot up to 803 per 100,000 by Friday, with the Balearic Islands, Madrid, Castilla-La Mancha, Catalonia and La Rioja provinces all recording rates of 400 to 525. The Spanish government considers an incidence rate of less than 25 per 100,000 to be a sign that the pandemic is under control, and 250 or more to indicate “extreme risk.” By this measure, every region in Spain bar the

Basque Country, Andalucía, Asturias and the Canary Islands are currently in or nearing extreme risk.

In a sign that many cases still go undetected, official figures show that around 14 percent of coronavirus tests return positive results across Spain. This figure rises to a huge 25.89 percent in the Community of Valencia, 23.4 percent in Castilla-La Mancha, 20.91 percent in Extremadura and 17.73 percent in Murcia. World Health Organisation (WHO) criteria state that a positivity rate of above 5 percent indicates that the virus is out of control.

Meanwhile, the vaccine roll-out in Spain has proceeded at a glacial pace, with only 277,976 having received at least one dose of the vaccine—or 0.6 percent of the Spanish population.

While many European countries imposed certain limited lock-down restrictions as cases rose in November and December, the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government refused to do so. It left it up to the 17 different autonomous regions to decide which measures should be implemented. Many regional governments imposed limited restrictions, like night-time curfews and curbs on travel between regions. However, schools and workplaces stayed open, continuing to spread the virus.

In response to the rising infection rates in recent weeks, several regions have been compelled to introduce new, limited restrictions to contain the virus—though all are far short of full lock-down measures. In Andalucía, bars and restaurants must now close at 6 p.m.; travel into or outside of the region is restricted.

The Balearic Islands regional government closed bars, shopping centres and gyms on the island of Mallorca. Galicia extended current restrictions on travel in and out of the area until the end of January and

decreed that hospitality must close at 6 p.m. in the cities of Ourense, Santiago and A Coruña. The Madrid region also limited travel between several municipalities inside the region.

On January 5, the Castilla y León regional authority requested that the PSOE-Podemos central government grant permission for a stay-at-home lock-down similar to that imposed last March. On Friday, this region had an incidence rate of 326 per 100,000 people, and 32.1 percent of the intensive care beds in this area were occupied—one of the highest figures in Spain. Test positivity rates also increased to 12.2 percent in the week ending 4 January, up from 6.91 percent only the week before.

Despite the region's grave situation, the PSOE-Podemos government refused the local authority's request. Health Minister Salvador Illa declared on Thursday that the measures currently in place provide "sufficient scope for action."

Echoing Illa's comments, Deputy Director of the Centre for the Coordination of Health Alerts and Emergencies (CCAES), Maria José Sierra Moros, declared in a press conference the same day that "there is no need for a hard lockdown, but [we should] take serious measures around some of the activities which we clearly know are a risk."

Sierra Moros, along with CCAES Director Fernando Simón, was one of 13 signatories of a lying letter to medical journal *The Lancet* in early December, in which health officials defended the government's politically criminal handling of the pandemic.

"There are many measures to take before another hard lock-down. Measures that have also proved to be effective," Sierra Moros continued in Thursday's press conference. Explicitly rejecting measures to close education centres, she declared: "At the moment, we do not have a recommendation from the Ministry [of Health] to close schools ... In reality, there have not been major outbreaks in schools ... there have been isolated cases that have immediately been controlled and confined."

Schools staying open "is important for children's development, including to [overcome] the social divides in this country," she said. "There are many more measures that can be taken ... before closing schools." She added, "Obviously everything helps, but we don't believe that now is the moment to make a

broad decision like that."

This feigned concern for children's educational prospects aims to obscure the real class interests behind maintaining in-person education during a deadly pandemic. Schools are being used as glorified child-minding services, to ensure that parents can continue going to work and generating profits for the financial aristocracy.

The government's refusal to take serious action to curb the spread of the disease is meeting with broad popular opposition.

Nearly 60 percent (59.2) of Spaniards believe that the government should have taken stricter measures to control the virus, according to a survey conducted in early December by the state-funded Centre for Sociological Research (CIS). Only 25.8 percent of Spain's population believed that the PSOE-Podemos government had done enough to combat the virus. The study also revealed that more than a quarter (27.9 percent) of Spain's population knew someone who had died from the virus.

Strikes are breaking out across Spain against official "back-to-work" policies and the attacks on workers' living conditions in recent years. Strikes have been called on every Monday this month by call centre workers at Konecra, a company providing telephone contact services to major firms including Santander Bank, Openbank, Bankia, Vodafone and Orange.

Hundreds of workers at the call centre company, based on Spain's north coast, are protesting the enforced return to in-person working, after having spent the last months working remotely to protect themselves against COVID-19. Workers spend hours speaking on the phone in enclosed, overcrowded offices—perfect conditions for airborne transmission of the virus.

Workers must take matters into their own hands to protect themselves from the disease. This necessarily entails a break with the trade unions and the PSOE-Podemos government—which knowingly implemented a policy leading to mass deaths—as part of a broader movement of workers across Spain and internationally.



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