

Coronavirus could lead to collapse of German healthcare system as early as May

Marianne Arens
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The coronavirus (SARS CoV2) is spreading rapidly in Germany. The Robert Koch Institute (RKI) reported on Sunday evening that 4,838 people have been infected, an increase of over 1,040 from Saturday and almost a tripling from the approximately 1,600 total cases recorded by Wednesday. Thus far, the deaths of nine people have been linked to the virus.

Professor Christian Drosten, a virologist at Berlin's Charité hospital, warned Monday of an "extremely serious situation." He added, "We must assume that we are rushing into the midst of an epidemic," and urged swift public action and radical measures.

By contrast, the federal government in Berlin has not shifted from its fatalistic attitude. At lunchtime on Thursday, federal Education Minister Anja Karliczek (Christian Democrats) claimed that a nationwide closing of schools was not being considered. A conference of education ministers from Germany's 16 federal states on Thursday afternoon concluded with no decision being taken, with participants merely agreeing that closing schools and nurseries would be "possible." Over the course of the weekend most states have announced the shutdown schools and kindergartens in the next days.

On Wednesday, Chancellor Angela Merkel stated bluntly that one had to expect that between 60 and 70 percent of the population would contract coronavirus. Her priority is to avoid the healthcare system being "overwhelmed." According to Merkel, the key issue is "to keep economic life going to some extent."

Such statements underscore the criminal indifference of the federal and provincial governments towards the working class. While all experts urgently appealed for "social distancing measures" by closing schools, public institutions, and even public transport systems, the government's main concern is that this would shrink gross domestic product.

Just this week, the World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 to be a pandemic. The highly contagious coronavirus is spreading rapidly across every continent. Around the world, over 130,000 people have been infected,

and the death toll has surpassed 5,000.

The number of cases in Germany is doubling every four to five days. If this trend continues at the same pace, Germany could have 9 million cases by May. Assuming a fatality rate in the range of 0.5-5 percent, anywhere from 45,000 to 450,000 people would die.

These were the case numbers first projected Thursday by the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. In its report, "The power of the big number," the newspaper predicted that by mid-May at the latest, some 1.2 million people would be infected. Already by mid-April, there would be a shortage of hospital beds to treat the sick.

The article stated, "In the majority of cases, the illness takes a harmless course. But roughly one in five illnesses takes a more serious course, requiring treatment in a hospital."

Since some patients require intensive care, these figures suggest that by mid-April "the coronavirus would use up all of the available capacity in Germany's healthcare system. And bear this in mind: we're talking about exponential growth. A few days later, the number of patients will double again."

The article also pointed out that doctors and nurses will also inevitably become ill, resulting in higher rates of absence among medical personnel, which would only accelerate the collapse of the system. "According to the experiences to date, between 1 and 2 percent of those infected die from COVID-19. A nationwide epidemic could therefore claim tens of thousands of lives. If the healthcare system collapses under this burden, the lethality rate would undoubtedly be higher," the newspaper noted.

This is the scenario which all serious experts have been warning about for some time, and which the Western governments long did nothing to avert. Only now have they belatedly swung into action.

The situation in the UK is no different. "We've lost a whole month of time," raged John Ashton, former head of Britain's public service, in a video for the *Independent* on Thursday. "I'm tearing my hair out and am very frustrated,"

he continued. “We have wasted a month in which we should have been working on this publicly ... If this continues to spread now, which is likely, we will not have enough hospital beds.”

In Berlin, cultural life has virtually come to a halt, with events being cancelled after some foot-dragging. As the number of coronavirus cases has continued to rise steadily, Berlin’s *Tagesspiegel* appealed on Thursday for drastic measures. The newspaper drew a stark comparison with the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918-19.

That pandemic at the end of World War I, which killed 50 million to 100 million people globally, had a fatality rate of between 2 and 3 percent, similar to the coronavirus today.

One interesting point was that two cities adopted diametrically opposed strategies at the time. In St. Louis, “social distancing measures,” the banning of all major events, closing of schools, and shutting of public institutions, were implemented a day or two after the first cases were found. By contrast, Philadelphia went ahead with a military parade of 200,000 people to support the troops in Europe. In the end, Philadelphia had twice as many deaths as St. Louis.

Entirely justifiably, the *Tagesspiegel* cites a team of researchers who raised the following demands in the medical journal *The Lancet*, “Voluntary or ordered quarantine, the banning of large-scale events, the closure of education institutions and workplaces where infections have been identified, and the isolation of households and cities... As a consequence, the public transport system would need to be suspended.”

The looming catastrophe is casting its shadow far and wide. In some hospitals, like the University Clinic in Frankfurt, face masks are running out, according to doctors who spoke to the WSWs. This has resulted in medical students being excluded from observing operations, even though this is a crucial part of their studies. The University Clinic has also been compelled to hire a security firm to guard its supplies of masks, paper towels, and disinfection lotion because they have repeatedly been stolen. This is a clear sign of the widespread and deep-going feelings of uncertainty within the population.

Some hospitals are also reporting that their supplies of blood donations are declining, a development that is only indirectly related to the coronavirus and which also points to mounting feelings of concern among the population. Hospitals in Greifswald and Rostock have reported a noticeable drop in blood donors. The blood donor service for the north-east, a part of Germany’s Red Cross, noted that a sharp decline in blood donors is currently being observed. Increasingly, hospitals are asking their already overworked staff to donate more blood.

All of these signs must serve as wake up calls for the

working class. It is working people who would pay the greatest price for the collapse of the healthcare system. Instead of passively accepting a continued unrestrained spread of the virus, workers must demand meaningful and robust quarantining measures, and above all the deployment of vast financial and medical resources to treat the sick and protect society as a whole. This is what the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Parties fight for.

The required resources are certainly available. The current dilapidated state of the hospitals did not fall from the sky. It is the product of conscious political decisions taken over the past 35 years. Since 1985, the hospitals and clinics have increasingly been privatised and organised on the principle of making a profit. The beneficiaries have been large healthcare corporations, like Fresenius-Helios, Rhön, Sklepios, Sana, Paracelsus, Mediclin and SRH. At the expense of healthcare employees and publicly-insured patients—i.e., the working population—they have transformed the healthcare system into a profit-making enterprise.

A glance at how the rich and super-rich are responding to the coronavirus underscores that more than enough money exists to initiate an effective program to combat its spread. As *Der Spiegel* reported in an article headlined, “How the rich are dealing with the crisis,” unlimited amounts of money are being wasted to protect them from the disease.

To avoid the risk at airports and in planes, they are increasingly turning to private jets, for which they are more than willing to pay over €12,000 per flight per person. As a businessman who arranges such flights explained to *Der Spiegel*, his customers “don’t want to share their cabin with anyone else.” Luxury yachts and isolated resorts are also being sold to wealthy customers in search of a place to retreat.

In the event the super-rich experience a dry throat, they of course can enjoy privileged care from doctors. If they pay for the corresponding extra benefit with their private insurance plan, they receive a “concierge service,” which gives them access to a doctor at any time of the day or night, and quicker access to specialist services.



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