

# As coronavirus pandemic grows, anger rises against German companies

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According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), the spread of the coronavirus has officially been considered a pandemic for a week now. On Tuesday, Germany's leading public health body, the Robert Koch Institute (RKI), announced that the health risk posed by COVID-19 is considered "high". Meanwhile, the number of known infections is rapidly increasing in all Länder (federal states). According to the RKI, the aim must be to "detect the infections as early as possible and delay the further spread of the virus as much as possible".

The Volkswagen Group's initial announcement that production lines will not be shut down until Saturday posed a direct threat to the workforce. While the government has banned any kind of public assembly, more than 120,000 VW employees in Germany were set to continue working closely on production and assembly lines for three more days. At the main plant in Wolfsburg alone three workers have already tested positive for coronavirus. The total number of cases in the entire company is 25 so far.

Then on Tuesday evening, the board of directors brought forward the closing date by one day. Now plants will be shut down after the late shift on Thursday. Due to the coronavirus and unrest in the workforce, VW plants in Spain, Portugal, Slovakia and Italy have already been shut down. In Italy, spontaneous strikes forced a shutdown.

At German sites, the IG Metall union is struggling to keep the peace. VW's top works council leader Bernd Osterloh (who is also a highly paid member of the supervisory board's executive committee) warned in a letter on Tuesday that there were complaints about a "two-tier society", especially from production on the assembly line. While in office areas, distancing rules applied due to the corona epidemic, workers in production were working shoulder to shoulder, he said. He now expected "an orderly exit from production". In other words, the IG Metall considers it its primary task to keep workers on the assembly lines until the company's official stop time, despite the massive risk of infection. On its website, the question, "Can I stay away from work for fear of infection?" is answered with a clear "No" (see: "Corona crisis in Germany: Factories and large companies must be closed").

VW is now using the crisis as an opportunity to put long-held radical restructuring plans and the elimination of tens of thousands of jobs into practice. In January, VW CEO Herbert Diess had announced the "slaughter of sacred cows". On Tuesday, the top manager, with a seven-million-euro annual salary, announced that the group had been able to increase its operating results by 600 million euros to 3.8 billion last year. The fact that the workers are paying for this with their health and their lives is now very clearly demonstrated by the decision not to

suspend production immediately. VW subsidiary Audi too only wants to temporarily shut down its plants in Ingolstadt, Neckarsulm, Belgium, Mexico and Hungary at the end of the week. In Brazil, VW workers have been told that they will stay on the job until March 31, followed by a 10-day "holiday" shutdown.

Government employment offices are treating their job-seeking "customers" just as badly as most large industrial companies. Despite the urgent instruction to stay at home, the Federal Employment Agency website states, "If activities are organised, you must continue to participate. Staying away out of sheer concern about a possible infection cannot be accepted as a reason for non-attendance".

In this way, hundreds of thousands of workers and the unemployed are being forced to expose themselves to the potentially fatal risk of infection every day. Significantly, one of countless Twitter messages states, "I have just about every known symptom—sudden fever, severe dry cough, aching limbs, extreme sore throat—not even been tested for influenza. The fact that I have to travel two hours a day across Berlin on public transport is ignored."

Also on Tuesday, WSWs received new reports about the COVID-19 situation. A report from Dresden graphically describes how devastating the delayed precautionary measures in day care centres, schools and universities are. If these facilities had been closed early and consistently, an enormous spread of the virus could undoubtedly have been prevented.

In Dresden, the first day care centre (Kita) was closed last Friday, when a child tested positive. According to the health department, this child had been infected by a parent who had returned from vacation on March 8. This person had self-isolated, but had sent the child to the municipal facility with about 180 other children on Monday.

At the weekend, a case was confirmed in the after-school care centre, which was then immediately closed, along with the affiliated day care centre and associated primary school, with over 300 children. On Sunday, 15 March, confirmation of infection was received about another child in a day care centre with 84 places as well as a student from the 700-pupil St. Benno grammar school.

The latter case is particularly critical, not only because of the school's size, but also because of its central location; in its immediate vicinity there are two vocational schools, several student dormitories and senior citizens' residences, the campus of the College of Fine Arts, the subsidiary campus of the Technical University of Dresden and the campus of the Protestant College. The results of a test on another suspected case at Kreuzgymnasium, with 800 students, will only become known on Wednesday.

The Technical University of Dresden also reported the first infected employee on March 15. The doctoral candidate had returned from a

business trip in France. His workplace, the Centre for Molecular and Cellular Bioengineering, with about 500 employees, was then closed. In parallel, the neighbouring Max Planck Institute reported a case among its staff.

It was only at the weekend that operations at the University of Dresden were also restricted. Now the Saxony State and University Library has been closed, affecting thousands of visitors every day, while refectories remained partially open. On Tuesday, all refectories were then closed after two further cases became known over the weekend. All public events were cancelled, many other public facilities on campus were closed and the start of the lecture period postponed to May 4.

These three examples alone show how important and necessary preventive containment measures would have been weeks ago.

On 12 March, the Saxony state government organised a crisis summit with business leaders and trade unions under the cynical slogan, “Secure employment, help companies in a targeted manner”. Since then, the number of those confirmed infected has increased almost eightfold within five days, from 5 to 39. From Monday to Tuesday alone, 14 cases have been added!

Despite this, on Tuesday, Dresden Mayor Kristin Kaufmann (Left Party), who bears responsibility for health, said the city was “well prepared”, and all known cases were mild. She pointed to the capacity of the municipal hospital of up to 80 beds with ventilation technology and up to 110 intensive care beds. With a population of over half a million people, of whom more than 150,000 are over 60 years old, this is just a bad joke.

It was reported from Chemnitz that the city had opened an emergency corona ambulatory station on Tuesday at the city’s trade fair grounds. There, in 140 treatment cabins with 50 couches, risk cases are to be tested—but “ONLY from Chemnitz”. Apparently, the authorities are assuming that the capacity of general practitioners and hospitals will soon be insufficient, despite their conciliatory speeches.

Those in power—who swiftly move from exercising criminal negligence to dictatorial police-state measures—have long been preparing to enforce curfews, as in France. The grand coalition of the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats is seeking to keep the population quiet through emergency measures and to release billions of euros to save the banks.

The sensible, considered and social-minded attitude of hundreds of thousands of ordinary workers and young people stands in striking contrast to this response by the ruling elite. There are many reports of spontaneous neighbourhood help initiatives. Many tweets contain passages such as, “I myself work in the public sector (university administration), and since yesterday, we’ve had to work from home ... But I’m thinking of those in manufacturing companies. The situation there is going to be much, much worse now, because no real protection has been taken so far.”

A doctor reports, “I am overwhelmed. My patients give me their gloves and disinfectant so I can protect myself and others at work. They know that there are no more suppliers.”

The head of a nursing home, himself a nurse, posted a video on the internet showing quite graphically how the current situation is pushing him and his colleagues to their limits. The nurses have no idea how they should care for their own children now, the young man said. They are left alone in all decisions. “With this video, I would like to show what kind of work these people are doing right now”, who are now experiencing an “extreme balancing act”.

On Tuesday, a “joint appeal by active carers” turned into a petition

in no time at all, with signatures arriving every second. Within a few hours, it had received tens of thousands of signatures. The petition is addressed to the Federal Minister of Health, Jens Spahn (Christian Democrat), with the words, “We have to talk!” The government’s policy of downplaying the situation so far was “a tragedy”, and conditions in hospitals were devastating.

The text is full of sarcasm about government’s plans to involve and “train” pensioners and students as nursing staff. “We are already looking forward to seeing the high-risk group standing at the ventilators of highly infectious patients. An incredibly promising, well thought-out measure!”

It goes on to say, “We nursing staff should have expected a little more substance in recent years rather than warm words, thank-you chocolates and parties for the functionaries. No, you can’t shift the blame onto the contract negotiating partners, cost bearers and us nursing staff, because one thing is clearer than ever: you have the responsibility for ensuring the nursing care of the population”.

Nursing staff point to a directive issued by the Baden-Württembergische Krankenhausgesellschaft e.V. to nursing institutions, which states that they are to make an effort to obtain protective material, “and if none can be organised, we should simply continue working without protection”. This instruction “was obviously coordinated with the Ministry of Social Affairs in Baden-Württemberg”.

Nursing staff comment, “That’s not how it works!” and set out a list of demands ranging from the “immediate organisation of the procurement of effective protective materials, taking all possibilities into account” to a “reliable promise of a substantial, state-funded wage supplement for all those who can hold out in this situation, those who take their children to emergency care groups, work overtime, cannot take breaks, cannot take rest periods”. The starting salary for all carers should be at least 4,000 euros and, if necessary, the “nationalisation of manufacturers and their suppliers” must be enforced for the procurement of materials.

The petition ends with the words, “We urgently warn you! Without these measures, the ventilators will soon stand around useless, because there will be nobody left to operate them!”

The petition underlines the urgency of the WSW’s call for all workers to form independent action committees and take their fate into their own hands. As stated in the recent WSW perspective: “The fact is that the demand for a serious effort to fight the pandemic is inseparable from the struggle to end the capitalist system and reorganize society on a socialist basis.”



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