

Coronavirus crisis: Hunger and malnutrition spread in Germany

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Research indicates some 13 million people in Germany are living in poverty or confront hunger, malnutrition and social misery due to the effects of the coronavirus pandemic. This total includes three million children condemned to poverty by the policies of Germany's ruling CDU-SPD (Christian Democratic Union-Social Democratic Party) grand coalition.

Kindergartens and schools across the country have now been closed for more than two weeks due to the spread of Covid-19. This means that the supply of free hot lunches for the children of those living on Germany's miserly Hartz-IV welfare payments has been cut off. This has disastrous consequences for the affected kids and their parents.

The Hartz IV system allocates just five euros [US\$5.41] per day for the feeding of a 15-year-old—a completely inadequate sum. The staff at job centres responsible for implementing the payments are well aware of this fact and often advise Hartz IV recipients to turn to the nationwide network of charitable organisations that provide food for the needy.

Germany has the largest low-wage sector in Europe due to the Hartz laws introduced by a previous SPD-Green coalition. Those laws plunged broad sections of the working class, particularly families and pensioners, into poverty. In Berlin, one in three children is dependent on the meagre benefits. In the former industrial Ruhr area, more than 30 percent of all children live in Hartz IV families. The situation is similar in Hamburg, Cologne, Düsseldorf and other big cities. Even the SPD newspaper, *Vorwärts* [Forward], had to admit last week that poor families needed an extra 200 to 250 euros a month to feed their children.

Last year, up to two million people were dependent on food donated from the non-profit Tafel [Table] food bank network. Those using Tafel services included

children and young people (30 percent) and pensioners (20 percent). Now this emergency aid has collapsed following the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic.

Of the 940 Tafel food banks nationwide with over 2,000 dispensing points, 400 have closed down. All of the 150 outlets of the charity project "Die Arche" [The Ark], where children and adolescents receive food, as well as help with recreational and school activities, have also closed down.

The consequences are devastating. The Tafel organisation reports that it receives calls for help from the needy on a daily basis. Families can no longer adequately feed their kids. "Children no longer have anything to eat," warned Wolfgang Büscher, spokesman for the Berlin Arche.

Hunger and malnutrition are now on the agenda for the wealthier capitalist countries and it is likely that the mass destruction of jobs as a result of coronavirus and the introduction of short-time work for millions will lead to even further impoverishment. Precarious workers—such as Germany's eight million "mini-jobbers" and self-employed—are already unable to pay rent and food due to the loss of their entire income.

Despite these developments, the defence of the obscene wealth of a minority is the first priority of the German government during the current crisis—not the health and well-being of the broad population. This was confirmed by the bipartisan approval in the Bundestag [German parliament] for a 600-billion euro package to support large companies and the financial elite.

The measures of the grand coalition include a so-called "social protection package" that will do little to alleviate the situation for those in greatest need. Mini-jobbers and the self-employed are not entitled to any short-time benefits. Payments of rent and loan instalments can be waived for a period, but must still be

paid at a future date. All Hartz IV benefits will be approved without interviews and probes into the financial status of new Hartz IV applicants will be suspended for six months. In addition, extra child benefits of up to 185 euros per month will be made available.

The government, however, has so far ignored the poorest of the poor. *Der Spiegel*, the news magazine, reports that only parents with jobs can apply for the additional benefits for children—unemployed parents are excluded. Even prior to the pandemic, cramped living conditions, financial hardship and the pressure resulting from social exclusion and stigmatisation made life very hard for the poor. Now “the hardship is clearly more noticeable,” said Büscher from the Berlin Arche.

The restrictions placed on public life and interaction due to the crisis also have a particularly dramatic effect on the homeless and refugees.

Last year, there were around 1.2 million homeless in Germany and around 50,000 rough sleepers. Numerous aid organisations presume the number of homeless people is actually much higher. Existing emergency shelters for the homeless have been closed due to the pandemic. The extreme restrictions on medical care and the almost complete elimination of donations via collecting bottles or selling newspapers, combined with the lack of Tafel support, make survival very difficult.

Confronted with the rapid spread of the coronavirus, German state governments have undertaken some measures to “get the homeless off the streets,” while at the same time taking into account the current hygienic and “social distancing” regulations. All of these measures, however, are completely inadequate.

In Berlin, for example, the SPD-Left Party-Green coalition in power in the nation’s capital since the beginning of 2017, has merely allowed emergency shelters to be used by the homeless around the clock. According to the Senator for Integration, Labour and Social Affairs, Elke Breitenbach (Left Party), the Berlin Senate has no intention of making available to the homeless the tens of thousands of empty hotel rooms in the city or the approximately 2,000 free places in the facilities of the State Office for Refugee Affairs.

Instead, space for just 350 people is to be created in a youth hostel with 200 beds and another 150 places prepared in an emergency aid shelter. This is despite the fact that the official number of homeless in Berlin is

2,000, with other sources estimating up to 10,000 homeless people in the city.

The situation is also dire for those without permanent accommodation, including hundreds of thousands of refugees. As a result of the strict pandemic measures, they are penned up indefinitely in cramped accommodation and—like everyone else—are only allowed to leave their quarters for the purposes of basic services or for a short walk.

Asylum seekers are especially hard hit by the measures taken by the state governments. Recently, the state government in Thuringia locked down a refugee centre with the help of police following a report of an asylum seeker being tested positive for the coronavirus. There has been no extensive testing carried out to reduce the quarantine restrictions nor decent accommodation made available to prevent further infections.

The crisis has brought to light the true extent of the division of society into rich and poor and the relentless class-based agenda of the bourgeoisie and its henchmen in all political camps.

Moves to strengthen the powers of the state apparatus and permit the deployment of the German army for domestic purposes are not aimed at bringing the pandemic under control, but rather at enforcing this class policy.

In the Italian cities of Naples and Palermo, hunger has already led to workers seeking to loot stores to obtain basic foodstuffs to feed their starving families. The Italian government responded with a brutal police operation and has now delegated police to patrol the stores.



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