

Germany: Weighing economic interests vs. human life in the coronavirus pandemic

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Although the number of coronavirus infected and dead in Germany, Europe and worldwide continues to rise, there are increasing voices urging a rapid lifting of social distancing and a return to work. Journalists, economists, politicians and some medical doctors are preparing the public for the fact that more people will have to fall ill and die from COVID-19 in the interest of the economy.

The abhorrence of the crimes of the Nazis, who destroyed “worthless lives” and worked millions of forced labourers to death, was previously considered a high moral hurdle in Germany against measuring the value of a human life in euros and cents. But now the media are again openly discussing how much a human life is worth and how many lives should be sacrificed to the interests of the economy.

Ten days ago, the news magazine *Der Spiegel* published an editorial with the provocative title: “Yes, one may weigh the economic damage against human lives.” In it, Christiane Hoffmann asks the question, “Is it possible to weigh the economic damage of the lockdown against the human lives that would be lost if the coronavirus were to spread?” Her answer: “Yes, you may. You have to.” It is “neither immoral nor cynical to state what has to be weighed against each other.”

Hoffmann demonstrates how cynical it really is three paragraphs later. She claims that “the question of the price of life” had also been raised before the coronavirus crisis. “Every decision to reduce hospital staff or to equip an emergency room more poorly indirectly decides on life and death; every discussion about expensive cancer drugs at the end of life is about the same question.” So she uses the massive cuts in health care that are now forcing nurses and doctors to treat COVID-19 patients in understaffed departments without the necessary protective equipment, at the risk of their lives, as an argument for letting even more people die!

Hoffmann, who has enjoyed a long career as a

journalist at the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Spiegel*, is married to a high-ranking Swiss diplomat and is richly rewarded, so she does not have to worry about adequate treatment if she becomes infected with the coronavirus. She pleads for an open debate on “what risks we are taking to get the economy back on track” mainly because she fears a revolt against a social system whose blatant social injustice becomes more apparent with each day of the pandemic. There is a danger, she writes, that “a wave of rejection, a real hatred of ‘those up there’” will follow.

The weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*, whose long-serving editor was former Social Democratic Party (SPD) Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, interviewed economist Clemens Fuest, head of the Munich-based Ifo Institute, and virologist Alexander Kekulé of the University of Halle-Wittenberg, to campaign for a quick lifting of social distancing—even if this means additional deaths.

Fuest warns that “the costs of the crisis will increase disproportionately over time.” Extending the lockdown by one week after one month is expensive, he said, “but when it comes after three months, it is much more expensive.”

Kekulé demands that the question should be asked, “How many deaths are we prepared to accept as a result of the pandemic?” After all, in some years 10,000 or 20,000 people in Germany die from influenza. And the measures taken against the pandemic also caused damage that resulted in deaths. He could not understand those who say, “Health always comes first.” It is “urgently necessary to weigh up the economic and medical consequences.” Too little has happened so far.

It is wrong “that we are not prepared to accept that individual people die so that in the end the majority is immune,” the virologist thinks. “If we keep society in lockdown for another three months or more, we are sacrificing everything we understand by our identity and

culture.”

The tabloid *Bild Zeitung* has also found a medical doctor who advocates a targeted spread of the virus. Professor Ansgar Lohse from the University Medical Centre Hamburg-Eppendorf (UKE) supports the strategy of so-called herd immunity, according to which, as many as possible from low risk groups must become infected in order to achieve a high level of immunity in society. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson originally advocated this strategy, but then had to back down due to public outrage. Meanwhile Johnson is in intensive care with COVID-19.

“We must allow those for whom the virus is the least dangerous to become immune first through infection,” Lohse told *Bild Zeitung*. Although in the meantime, many younger people have also died from COVID-19, and it is by no means certain whether infected people will be immune afterwards, Lohse mainly wants to use children to achieve herd immunity. “Both children and the vast majority of their young parents do not belong to the risk group. The faster this group goes through an infection, the better. Therefore, day-care centres and schools should open again soon.” He is “in discourse with many colleagues from very different disciplines who think similarly.”

In his blog, Morning Briefing, former financial daily *Handelsblatt* editor Gabor Steingart rejoices that “in view of the ban on contact, assembly, demonstrations and extremely restricted freedom of travel in Germany,” “resistance has finally formed uniting lawyers specialising in medical law, writers, cultural workers, business experts and journalists of different stripes in their doubts about the proportionality of this policy.”

Among others, he quotes the writer Juli Zeh, who is a member of the SPD and whose novel *Unterleuten* (“Sub-people”) was recently broadcast as a three-part series on ZDF. Zeh wrote in the feature section of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* that large sections of the professional world agree “that so-called herd immunization must take place, that is, at least 60 to 70 percent of the population must be infected until the pandemic subsides.”

Right-wing extremist journalist Roger Köppel, who heads the unofficial central organ of the xenophobic Swiss People’s Party, *Weltwoche*, and also quotes Steingart, complains that the cure is worse than the disease. “Stop this self-immolation of the economy,” he demands. “Without the economy, we won’t have coronavirus—everyone starves to death.”

Wolfram Weimer, former editor-in-chief of *Welt*,

Cicero and *Focus*, demands, “Germany’s enforced coma must end on April 19! The pandemic control by closing down the economy is misguided, because it could mean in the end, the operation was successful, but the patient is dead.”

The demand to weigh human life against the interests of the economy is not limited to Germany. As the WSWS has shown in a recent perspective, this demand is also being made in numerous other countries—by the British *Economist* magazine, the American magazine *Politico* and numerous other publications. It means, the perspective argues, “nothing more nor less than sacrificing human lives for the profit interests of the capitalists. From the standpoint of the ruling class, the process of class exploitation through production must continue. And those who die can be replaced. The single overriding concern is the growth and expansion of stock market values for the enrichment of the financial oligarchy.”

It is significant that Germany’s leading stock index, DAX, has jumped by 1,000 points since the beginning of this week and yesterday rose temporarily above 10,500 points. Although there is no end in sight to the crisis, speculators on the stock markets see the opportunities to make a killing. After a decade of cutting social spending and destroying the health care system in the name of “balancing the books,” the federal government is now opening the financial floodgates to business.

The support packages for the coronavirus crisis now amount to almost €1,200 billion, more than three times the annual federal budget. Most of this huge sum is going into the coffers of the large corporations and banks, with only a fraction being spent on the fight against the pandemic and to alleviate its social consequences.

The enormous sums now being pumped into the financial markets must be compensated for by the intensified exploitation of the working class. This is behind the demand for a return to work at the expense of human lives.



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