

Germany: Hesse politicians and employers expose workers to risk of COVID-19 infection

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The effects of the coronavirus crisis are exposing the propaganda of shared crisis management—“We are all in the same boat”—more and more openly as a lie. Hundreds of thousands of workers are experiencing how the privileged upper classes are taking care of themselves and their families while forcing employees dependent on them to continue working under insecure conditions.

The WSWs receives reports and information from a wide range of work sectors, all of which make a similar point: the super-rich, highly paid politicians and well-off trade union officials are blackmailing workers with the alternative of either risking infection with COVID-19 or losing their financial livelihood.

One example from the federal state of Hesse is the refuse collection service in the city of Frankfurt am Main. “As a refuse worker, you can’t work from home,” was the comment of a stressed garbage operative in the west of Frankfurt. He said he and his colleagues are currently finding that “the bins are fuller than ever now that so many people are staying at home.” Yet the refuse workers are in no way protected from infection.

As the “Hessenschau” television broadcast reported on April 6, the Frankfurter Entsorgungs-und Service GmbH refuse service (FES) has decided not to provide workers with face protection, arguing that they do not want to “take this scarce commodity away from medical staff.” The FES justifies the decision on its homepage by saying that with heavy work gloves, it is not even possible to put on a face mask during work. And “thirdly, the wearing of face masks during heavy physical work throughout the day per se is an additional burden and thus increases the health risk.”

The FES has also locked the shower rooms. Since then, refuse collectors have been forced to get into their private cars in their filthy overalls. They must drive home without washing in order to take a shower there first, exposing their families to additional danger. The canteen has also been closed, and for the most part, the only food available is from snack and drink machines.

The FES has been partially privatised since 1998, with half

owned by the city of Frankfurt and half by the Remondis Group, the largest German recycling, water management and service company. The FES supervisory board is chaired by Rosemarie Heilig (Green Party), who heads Frankfurt’s Environment Department. As usual, several Verdi trade unionists belong to the supervisory board, and FES works council chairman Oliver Dziuba is deputy chairman.

City councillor Heilig reacted to the report on the Hessenschau on Tuesday with an official statement on the FES website saying, “We must ensure waste disposal even in these difficult times.” For the FES staff this means “that their normally difficult job is now being carried out under much more difficult conditions”. Only on April 7 Heilig gave assurances that from now on the garbage vehicles would be disinfected every three days. “In order to counteract fears,” the communication goes on to say, garbage workers would be provided with “so-called loop scarves”—i.e., still no masks but sweat-inducing collars.

Many DIY stores and material yards are still open to the public and are in full swing. This is a clear sign that the authorities are not taking the pandemic measures of the World Health Organization and scientists very seriously. Many well-heeled businessmen and women are playing fast and loose with the coronavirus regulations, so that their profits do not suffer. They welcomed the irresponsible demands and calls from politicians to end the lockdown after Easter.

Serious virologists have demonstrated repeatedly how criminally dangerous this is. Staying at home is the only way to break the chain of infection when, at a certain point, it is no longer possible to trace a case completely and isolate all contacts. The Charité virologist Christian Drosten emphasized this once again on Friday, when he said that the lockdown is the only way to “stop such an epidemic anyway ... Then you don’t have to trace cases anymore, then everyone is at home.”

It is obvious that disregarding this rule unnecessarily exacerbates the impact of the pandemic. In Hesse alone, the number of infections is now approaching 6,000, and 123

people have already died of COVID-19 in the state. Nevertheless, new cases are coming to light all the time, where employers are quick and willing to see the crisis as an opportunity and expose their workers to senseless danger.

A prospective IT specialist told the WSWS about his company, a mechanical engineering firm that manufactures coordinate measuring machines. In agreement with the trade unionists on the works council, the board of directors has announced short-time working for 12 months. At the same time, trainees are classified as “systemically relevant” and will continue to be employed in the company. They are to keep production running, although the manufacture of coordinate measuring machines can hardly be considered vital. At the same time, trained specialists, who would of course be considerably more expensive for the company, are sent on short-time working in consultation with the works council, and the company does not even top up short-time working allowances.

The sales management sent a letter to several trainees in the event of a lockdown, stating that they were “systemically relevant” and indispensable at their place of work. In addition, at least one trainee was asked to withdraw his leave application for July and August. “I’m sure many people have received this,” says the report received by the WSWS. And further, “The letter also says that for July and August, if possible, no holidays should be approved, and that the company holidays should also be cancelled.” The mood in the company was correspondingly negative.

For example, employers are using the worst paid, often precariously employed workers, young people and staff to save costs and circumvent the official coronavirus instructions.

The music equipment trading company Session, with branches in Walldorf and Frankfurt am Main, is considered the largest music store in the Rhine-Main area. Its owner and managing director Udo Tschira, is heir to the software company SAP, one of the 25 richest families in Germany (according to rankings by *Manager-Magazin*, *Bilanz* and *Forbes*). Together with his brother, he has private assets of \$11.7 billion. Tschira, together with his works council chairman Jochen Rautenstrauch, has also announced short-time working in a “joint mail.”

However, the multibillionaire insists that many employees continue to show up for work despite the risk of infection, and the works council gives its blessing.

A Session employee writes to the WSWS, “The fact that Session wants to increase the planned short-time working allowance from 60 to 80 percent is no consolation. The pay at Session is so lousy that it is difficult to survive in the banking metropolis of Frankfurt even without a loss of pay.” The short-time working allowance meant he would

“probably no longer be able to pay the rent for my small apartment ... Most workers last received a pay rise 7 to 10 years ago, and the payment of individual workers is very arbitrary.”

He continues, “The works councils say that nothing can be done about it because there are too few employees in the union. The works council representatives thus blame the ordinary workers for their own inaction and chumminess with management. But the unions are rightly completely discredited among the workforce. They are the first to agree to compulsory redundancies. This is the current situation in a factory headed by one of the richest men in Germany.”

The accumulation of these cases and the great dissatisfaction that prevails among the workers concerned make clear that a collective response from the working class is now necessary. The WSWS calls on workers to make their experiences public, discuss them with colleagues and form independent action committees. Only in this way can they push through decisive demands for their own protection in the coronavirus pandemic.

These demands must include the immediate suspension of all non-essential activities. Full wage compensation must be paid for all workers, whether they are affected by illness, short-time working or closure! All these decisions must be under the control of the workers’ independent action committees.

Write to us about your experience of the reaction by the employers to the corona pandemic. Also write if you want to support the establishment of such independent workers’ committees and find out more about the Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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