

German National Academy of Sciences demands reopening of primary schools

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“Should our schools be abused as petri dishes for a long-planned policy of herd immunity?” wrote a teacher from the state of North Rhine-Westphalia to the *World Socialist Web Site*. “I’m horrified at the cold and calculated manner in which the lives of students, their families and teachers are to be put at risk after the Easter holidays.”

The proposal to gradually lift the coronavirus shutdown by opening primary schools first was contained in a statement published on Easter Monday by the German National Academy of Sciences, the Leopoldina, in Halle. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who is to meet today with the minister presidents of the federal states to discuss a gradual lifting of the lockdown, already stated last Thursday that the Leopoldina statement would be “very important” for her decision.

With the cynical justification that “the younger students in the education system rely more on personal care, direction and support,” the Leopoldina proposed “gradually opening the primary schools and lower years of high school.” A return to normal classroom teaching in the senior levels of the education system should take place at a later date, the statement argued, because online learning can be used more effectively by older students.

Two teachers from the Ruhr region explained to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* what this would mean. If the government opened the schools next week, the dilapidated school buildings in poverty hot spots would become “coronavirus distribution centers” and “disease-ridden locations.”

“Their schools are run-down, so the virus would have free rein,” wrote the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in summing up the comments of the two teachers. “Several classrooms can’t even be ventilated with fresh air. The

windows would stick and the handles have been removed for security reasons on some tilting window frames ... for as long as we can remember, there has been no soap in the school toilets. And there are no holders for paper towels ... the virus has only exposed problems that have long been known.”

The use of young children as laboratory rats is just one of many suggestions currently being propagated with the aim of lifting the restrictions to combat the coronavirus pandemic and allowing big business to get up and running as quickly as possible—regardless of how many human lives it costs. Similar proposals were drafted by the “Coronavirus Experts Council” established by the North Rhine-Westphalia government in a paper titled “How we can responsibly return to normality.”

In the opinion of the Leopoldina, all areas of public life should gradually be returned to normality after the schools open, provided the well-known protective measures are retained. “For example, the retail and hospitality sectors can open first, along with the operations of general business and the public authorities,” declares the statement. “In addition, business and private travel can be undertaken so long as protective measures are observed.”

In contrast to the Leopoldina, the Robert Koch Institute (RKI), the federal agency for infectious disease control, has explicitly advised against lifting the shutdown at present. The number of new infections continues to come in at a relatively high level and there is no clear evidence that it will decline further, said RKI President Lothar Wieler. “Let us together maintain the behaviour regulations,” he appealed to the population.

The Leopoldina was hardly known to anyone prior to its emergence with statements on the coronavirus.

Founded in 1652 and named after Kaiser Leopold I, it managed to survive the Nazi dictatorship and the Stalinist German Democratic Republic (GDR), although in badly damaged condition. It was declared to be the National Academy of Sciences in 2008, largely without any public notice. It does not carry out its own research, but is an association of professors with political ambitions. In 2016, it authored a paper on the German health care system that indirectly declared 1,300 of the country's 1,600 hospitals to be superfluous.

Remarkably, there is not a single professor who specialises in virology among the 26 who signed the latest statement on the coronavirus pandemic. Instead, there are sociologists, jurists, pedagogues, theologians, chemists and biologists, and two explicit spokesmen for business interests: The president of the Ifo Institute, Clemens Fuest, and Lars Feld, the head of Economic Experts, an advisory body to the German government.

The document applauds the trillion-euro bailouts organised by the government and the European Central Bank for the banks, big business and the share market, and demands that a return to austerity policies be undertaken as soon as possible.

“The economic policy measures adopted in the crisis must be withdrawn or adapted as soon as possible to support a sustainable economy within the framework of the free market,” states the last paragraph of the statement. “This includes the withdrawal of the state from companies, insofar as interventions were necessary in the crisis, and the reduction of government debt.”

The call to evaluate the measures taken to combat the pandemic “in the context of their cost and benefit” runs through the Leopoldina statement from beginning to end. This means that human life should be weighed against economic interests. “On the one hand,” says the document, the measures should “slow the spread of the infection and minimise the health risk to the population, on the other hand it should keep negative social and economic effects to a minimum.”

The authors repeatedly try to downplay the dramatic consequences of the pandemic, which have been made clear by the horrific images from Italy and New York. An entire chapter is devoted to state propaganda, or, as the document refers calls it, the improvement of “risk communication.” It must “simultaneously fulfill two purposes.” It must on the one hand “encourage the

willingness of the citizens to comply with the necessary measures,” and “on the other hand avoid promoting unjustified fear.”

To prepare the population for the lifting of the protective measures, the Leopoldina explicitly advises against using graphics “that show the rapid daily rise of new infections and the cumulative death toll from COVID-19.” The statement warns that “this density of information and the selective presentation of absolute numbers increase the subjectively experienced threat and make it more difficult to identify the actual risks.”

Fatality rates must be “calculated on the basis of all of those infected and the entire population, rather than registered cases,” which would reduce the death rates many times over. The number of deaths from COVID-19 must be compared to “the number of deaths in a comparative time frame in an equivalent age group from other illnesses.” From this differentiated risk assessment, it would become clear “that exaggerated individual fear and panic are without foundation.”

The Leopoldina statement is part of the effort of ruling elites around the world to organise a return to work as quickly as possible, risking the lives of hundreds of thousands in the process.



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