

Growing resistance in Germany to the opening up of schools

Andy Niklaus and Carola Kleinert**28 April 2020**

There is growing public opposition in Germany to the government's policy of opening up schools despite the continued spread of the coronavirus pandemic. Following the press release issued by the government last Wednesday, tens of thousands of pupils, teachers and parents have spoken out against the proposals to open up schools and compel pupils to take exams planned long before the coronavirus struck.

High school students in various federal states were expected to begin taking their exams on Monday. This is despite the legitimate concerns on the part of students that they may be infected and then transmit COVID-19 to their families under conditions where schools provide only minimal and entirely insufficient protection.

There are no tests available to identify those affected by the virus, and students will not be given protective masks. The required safety distance of at least 1.5 metres between classroom tables is irregularly observed—as demonstrated in private photos and videos available on social media.

Disinfectants are not made being available nationwide, among other things, on the grounds that this helps protect children and adolescents from the health risks accompanying such disinfectants. It is up to the teachers, like the students, to provide their own masks.

In Berlin, one high school student applied to postpone her exams due to the serious illness of members of her family. An administrative judge rejected the student's request, referring to the guidelines set down by the Berlin Senator for Education Sandra Scheeres (Social Democratic Party, SPD). High school students belonging to groups of those alleged to be at particular risk, or related to those affected by the virus, are still expected to take their exams in separate rooms.

The high school student, Lisa, from North Rhine-Westphalia, published on Twitter an open letter to the minister of education, in which she calls for "a halt to the hasty renewal of school operations." To the WSWS, she reaffirmed her request for the alternative of giving an "average level high school diploma or average degree to all." She denounced those politically responsible, saying: "We are not guinea pigs to be tested for the consequences of loosening up restrictions!"

When asked about the hygienic situation at her high school prior to the pandemic, Lisa reported that the situation was "horrific." "The school toilets were in a very poor hygienic condition: there was no soap, no towels, clogged toilets and overfilled rubbish bins in the toilets," she said. The school management had tried to improve the situation with measures such as toilet supervision, but without success. "Not all of the toilets were cleaned regularly by cleaning staff. Warm water remains a dream. There is no such thing in schools," Lisa said.

She could not report on the current protective measures at her school. Her teacher offered to hold a digital discussion because she belongs to a risk group. "On Monday, I will have to see whether I dare take part in classes or try instead to prepare for my exams at home," Lisa said. "My mother is very upset because she and one of my three siblings belong to those at risk. She thinks that any idea the schools will comply with hygienic standards is utopian."

Her classmates have varying views about the demand to obtain a so-called average high school diploma—i.e., adopting the previous average school grade of the student during his or her studies. Some approved, while others considered the exams to be necessary. However, they all agreed that exams should not be held "under

these circumstances.” “All of the pupils had worries and fears, but given the fact that exams have not been cancelled, many are forced to attend classes, otherwise they will fail to fulfil the requirements for their diploma.”

Like many other pupils and high school students, Lisa emphasised not only the health aspects involved, but also the lack of equal opportunity in the exams compared with previous years. No account is taken of the huge pressure under which the high school students have to take the exams. She said, “It is morally and ethically unacceptable to give students sole responsibility for attending school and the attendant risks of being infected with a deadly virus through contact with people on the way to and from school, and then transmitting this virus to those at home!”

From this point of view, Lisa also noted the situation in the health care system. “In the event of a second wave, our health care system would be overloaded, which would involve thousands more casualties. This is the standpoint of the Robert Koch Institute and prominent virologists such as Dr. [Christian] Drosten.”

When asked whether she saw a connection between the school openings and the campaign for a “return to work,” Lisa replied: “From the beginning of the coronavirus crisis, I have only seen economic interests at work. Open the schools so everyone can go back to work and have no reason to stay home. I think it’s very obvious. This is extremely irresponsible and will very likely cost many lives. It’s really sad to see the value politicians place on the population when it comes to big business interests—i.e., none at all.

“A few months ago, I thought that Germany had struck a reasonable balance with its form of capitalism, but the type of politics today has proven the opposite.”

Lisa is not alone in this respect. Young people and workers face fundamental political issues in their demands for the protection of their lives and health. Their demands inevitably lead to conflict with the political establishment and the entire profit-oriented social system.



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