German students oppose reopening of schools

Our reporters
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Under conditions of the worldwide spread of COVID-19, strong opposition among students in Germany to the reopening of schools is developing. Under the slogan “average grade 2020,” students are demanding the suspension of final exams and the closing of schools so long as the lives of students, teachers and their relatives are at risk. A petition which obtained 150,000 signatures in a short period of time called instead of exams for students to receive an average grade based on the work they have already completed during the school year. Students who want to improve their grade could take part in an oral exam via video conference, the petition suggested.

Members of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality spoke to organisers of the initiative from several federal states.

Vicky, 19, a final year high school student from North Rhine-Westphalia, said, “The politicians would like 'normality' to return but in my opinion, it's much too soon for that. Although the infection curve is declining a little bit, this flattening off will not last long if so many people come together in a location where it’s impossible to stick to the hygiene regulations.”

“I think it is irresponsible,” commented Nova, 19, angrily, a final year student from Bavaria. “It feels like an experiment to me—and in a few weeks we'll see the effect and what happens when so many people come together in one place. Above all, I am personally affected by it, since I live with my grandparents, who both belong to the high-risk group. I don't want to go into school every day with a bad conscience and worry about infecting them when I come home. Additionally, many students and teachers are also members of high-risk groups. What about them?”

Nova, who sent a protest letter to political parties and politicians, firmly opposes the reopening of schools under these conditions. “It is a paradox for me when mass gatherings are banned and restrictions are rightly imposed on people going outdoors, but hundreds of us have to go to school. And the politicians decide all of this on a telephone conference!”

If all final exams are held, Nova believes this will increase inequality in education. “Some students don't have the chance to prepare for the exam, because, for example, they have to share a computer with someone else. The upper class naturally has an advantage there, because they can afford better equipment.”

Joshua is a ninth year student at a private high school in Nürnberg. “The government's argument that an average grade is unfair is dishonest and actually just inhumane,” he said. “In Berlin, where the supposedly 'left' Social Democrat/Left Party/Green coalition governs in the State Senate, letters from students calling for exams to be delayed are being rejected with the claim that it's just the way it is and nothing can be done about it. In addition, the safety measures are not being observed anywhere. In most toilets, there is no disinfectant or soap, and some of them are closed for weeks due to maintenance. I don't want to think about how bad it is in the dilapidated state-run schools.”

Clemens, who is a ninth year student at a secondary school in Bavaria, reported, “We have to go back to school on Monday. They are trying to divide us up into smaller groups with reduced hours. Otherwise, we know nothing about how things will work. There are no cleaners at my school. It is a listed building that requires substantial repairs in several areas. The toilets are unusable—soap is often not refilled for weeks, the paper rolls for drying your hands are often used up or don't work. There are no additional protection measures and no provision for disinfectant has been made.”

Adrian, 14, attends a public high school near Hannover and told the IYSSE that the required social distancing cannot be observed. “There are 1,000 students at our school alone, so the risk is high. Even during normal times, nobody wants to go to the toilet, soap and paper towels are usually lacking. There will be a requirement to wear a mask, but the school management has repeatedly said that there is no money to buy masks. I'm supposed to start again in mid May.”

Olivia, 22, who attends a professional college in Cologne, said, “The schools are already poorly equipped, and nothing much is going to change. I have to go to school again tomorrow, and even the route there is risky, because the buses and trains are always full. My school is large–I feel very pessimistic.” Olivia does not own a mask. She said that she has to use a scarf.

Schools in terrible condition

“It has to be said that they're acting from the standpoint of business,” said Vicky. “It's not a secret that schools have been in a terrible state for years. Something should have been done long ago about the lack of hygiene measures in educational institutions—whether primary schools, secondary schools, or professional colleges. Now, where we have a pandemic, there is a lot of catching up to do. And not just at a few schools, but at lots of them.”

That means, according to Vicky, “there is a very high demand for hygiene products, like disinfectant and paper towels. I noticed that some pictures of the state of hygiene in the schools were shown in the media. But in a subsequent interview with (North Rhine-Westphalia's education minister) Mrs. Gebauer, she said that she had received great feedback from students. So the whole truth is not being taken into account by the politicians in public.”

“We are being ignored and just not taken seriously,” acknowledged Olivia. “Are the final exams so important that we should put ourselves and our families at risk?” She added that she feels like a “guinea pig... that's how we all feel!” She is certain that the government is deliberately accepting that students will get infected, and remarked, “We are of course young and not part of a 'high-risk group‘.”

Like Olivia, Adrian said he has the impression that the government wants “to use students as guinea pigs.” He went on, “What they're concerned about is that students can graduate so they can go to work. They don't want to slow down this process. That also explains why the older years are being sent back first. It is criminal and inhumane to expose young people to such a risk in order to see when it will be possible to get the economy up and running again. There are definitely class interests behind it: the ruling elite wants to rake in profits, while everyone else just wants to survive. An abyss is really opening up.”

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Joshua pointed to the recommendations of leading virologists. “It’s a fact that since some restrictions were lifted, the reproduction rate in Germany has risen from 0.7 to 0.9,” he said.

“If a further 'easing' of the restrictions is enforced, it will be a huge threat to us students and the workers in factories. Thousands would die! If the measures recommended by scientists are not imposed, the virus will also spread unhindered to Africa and the rest of the world. Millions of people could then die. You can see in the coronavirus apps how there aren't many infections in the countries in Africa and Oceania. If the virus also spreads there due to globalisation, we will have another health disaster with possibly hundreds of millions of deaths.”

Joshua added that he finds it horrifying “how German politicians claim that the situation here is different than in Italy or the US. Leading scientists and the Robert Koch Institute warn that similar things could happen in Germany if we are too lax on the issue. If the reproduction rate rises above 1.0, there will be another period of exponential growth here. According to health experts, that would lead to the entire health system collapsing sometime between July and October, and we would have conditions akin to war, like in the United States. Then we would also be digging mass graves and the military would be transporting away dead bodies.”

Clemens agreed that this danger exists, commenting, “If there really was progress in combatting the virus, as they claim, they will quickly be gambled away. I would not be surprised if pictures come out of Germany in a few weeks like they did from Italy and the US, where bodies were collected by forklifts and deposited in mass graves.”

A policy of “controlled infection”

Several students expressed their fear to the IYSSE that the opening of the schools is part of a policy of “controlled infection” like that pursued by the governments in Sweden and Britain.

“The reopenings are just the first step in a herd immunity strategy,” said Adrian. “In regions where the health care system is not good, it will have catastrophic results. The lives of millions of people will be at risk as a result of this. When Angela Merkel stated at that press conference that her government expects 60 to 70 percent of the population to get infected, I was shocked–at how negligently they responded even though they could see the situation they were heading towards.”

“The government is certainly accepting that risk,” stated Vicky. “(North Rhine-Westphalia's Education Minister) Gebauer spoke specifically on this issue. She stated, to paraphrase, that you have to deal with the deaths of students, teachers, acquaintances or relatives. I think this statement is totally inappropriate. If people die who are close to us and we are potentially responsible for that, it can be extremely hard to cope with psychologically. If I knew that I had the life of someone else on my conscience, I would probably have a breakdown. I have no idea how exams should be written then. I also have no idea how returning to school and taking exams will affect the course of the pandemic.”

“The opening of the schools shows how much the 'foot soldiers' are worth to the government,” added Joshua. “It is really assuming a fascistic character. They are declaring once again that human life isn't really worth that much and it can be easily sacrificed for profits. It is a natural process, as that Gill wrote in Der Spiegel.”

The sociologist Bernhard Gill advocated a policy of herd immunity in an article in the news magazine *Der Spiegel* on April 13, in which he wrote that it would create “space for new life.”

Vicky also believes it is conceivable that the German government has decided behind closed doors to pursue a policy of “herd immunity,” even though this would result in “thousands of deaths.”

“Unfortunately, I don't know what was discussed behind the closed doors of the conference room, what was told to the people and what is being hushed up,” she remarked. However, she was in no doubt that the revival of social Darwinist and eugenicist views is “repulsive.”

“I don't understand how in this day and age one can take that standpoint. It is fatal that such people still have influence in politics. In the course of history, these positions were applied twice: once during the colonisation of Africa, when it was used, among other things, to justify slavery, and also by the Nazis on the Jews,” she stated.

Charles Darwin's original positions, said Vicky, “have been torn out of their context twice before. If those positions are still held today, then I am very disappointed that nothing has been learned from history—to be honest, there are many other issues where nothing has been learned from history. You never know when this could have a huge impact on modern-day Germany.”

Elements of a “fascist ideology”

Clemens said that the policy of herd immunity “certainly” bears elements of a “fascist ideology.”

“It says that we should allow as many people as possible to get infected, and kill tens of thousands or millions in the process. While the development shocks me, I’m not surprised. Fascistic conceptions have long been prevalent within the ruling elite and are constantly propagated. Human life is worth nothing to them, just their own profits.”

“Over recent years we've had a crazy counter-revolution in Europe and other countries,” he added. “Social standards that were fought for by workers in the major struggles of the 20th century have been abolished.”

Clemens believes the source of the aggressive back-to-work campaigns by governments in the United States and Europe is to be found in the class struggle. “Now that they have plundered the state treasuries, they want to start making profits again, and they couldn't care less about the lives of the workers and their children. As soon as the children have been stowed away in the schools, the parents can be sent back to work. That's the calculation.”

Olivia stressed that the impact of the pandemic on students is international in character. “I have relatives in France, Britain, Switzerland, and the United States. My cousins' exams in France and England were cancelled. In Switzerland, they still have a curfew. Nobody knows what will happen next,” she commented.

“This movement can only achieve anything if it links up internationally,” said Joshua towards the end of the discussion. “Students around the world face the same questions. They have to align themselves with other sectors of society, like workers in the factories, who are now supposed to start producing profits once again.” At the same time, the demands must be connected to a socialist program, he added.

“Capitalism cannot deal with any of the catastrophes we face, whether it's the coronavirus pandemic, climate change, or even the outbreak of a third world war,” he said. “While a tiny minority enriches itself under capitalism, the needs of the majority are prioritised under socialism. Concretely, this would mean that workers would no longer have to risk their lives to produce profits. Instead, huge sums should be invested in testing and into health care to create a vaccination.”

“I also think that an international and socialist programme is necessary to defeat the pandemic,” said Adrian. “In contrast to their governments, young people and workers in every country have the same interests. If other countries follow Germany's approach, movements among students will develop there. I hope that students realise this and are prepared to

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cooperate across national borders." Instead of investing in wars and rescuing banks, money must be made available to strengthen the health care sector, upgrade schools, and other public services.

In conclusion, Clemens directed an appeal to his fellow students and their relatives, "We cannot allow everyone to go back to work now. Human life is more important than profit, in contrast to the ruling elite's claims. Students must form committees to enforce their demands. That can, for instance, be done online. It is important to reach agreement internationally–if students in Germany take action, for example, they must immediately make contact with students in France, the United States, and other countries."

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) fights among students and young people for a socialist programme against war, nationalism, and social inequality. Read our statement of principles *and make* contact *with us today to get involved.*

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