

Growing resistance in Germany to returning to schools as coronavirus pandemic continues

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As part of their back to work policy, the federal and state governments in Germany are also aggressively pushing for the reopening of schools, endangering the health and lives of thousands of teachers, students and their families.

The approach is particularly ruthless in Saxony and North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW). In Saxony, the social distancing rules in school buildings are now being overridden, and in NRW teachers who were previously protected because they belonged to risk groups are being ordered back to schools.

“All teachers from the risk group, i.e., teachers with previous illnesses and teachers who have reached the age of 60,” are now “obliged to participate in procedures for taking oral examinations,” according to an instruction issued by the NRW Education Ministry on May 11. The same applies to “pregnant and nursing teachers.” The “use of these groups of people in the context of oral examinations” is “permissible.”

In the federal state of Saxony, with its Christian Democrat-Social Democrat-Green coalition government under Michael Kretschmer (CDU), the official requirement of maintaining at least 1.5 metres separation in classrooms will be eliminated. “From Monday, May 18, 2020, compulsory school attendance for grades 1 to 4 will apply again,” says a letter from the Saxony State Ministry of Culture to “all headmasters.” In primary and special schools, lessons could be implemented “continuously in the respective classroom and class group.” The “generally valid distance rule” was “thus not valid within the fixed class groups.”

Resistance is growing among teachers and pupils against this irresponsible policy, which threatens to turn schools into new hotspots of the coronavirus pandemic.

A protest letter from Leipzig’s Kurt Masur Elementary School, with more than 500 pupils, to the Saxony Education Minister Christian Piwarz (CDU), says the

announcement of the start of school operations has triggered a “shock-induced paralysis.” It was “in no way understandable” that the “prescribed infection protection measures in private and public areas are [being] overridden” intentionally. Completely opening “one of the largest elementary schools” in Saxony means “accommodating 20 classes with up to 28 children per class in rooms of up to 58 square metres.”

Teachers who signed the letter asked indignantly what “the changed risk assessment” of the Saxony state government was based on and why “testing opportunities would not be offered until June.” They also point to the complete lack of protection so far. “Up to now, there are no medical face masks, glasses or the like available at our school. Why is this not provided for the self-protection of the staff if social distancing is not observed?”

They accuse the state government of deliberately accepting the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and the catastrophic consequences that would follow. “If you so consciously calculate an increased risk of infection, why then [open] all primary schools in Saxony at the same time?” they ask angrily. And continue, “But how do you then ‘correct’ consequential health damages caused by COVID-19?”

The protest by the Leipzig teachers is part of growing opposition to the policy of opening schools all over Germany. Student, teacher, and parent associations have spoken out against the policies of the respective state governments. There are many voices expressing their anger, desperation and protest on social media.

As early as the beginning of May, student representatives of the Lise-Meitner Gymnasium in Leverkusen (NRW) condemned the opening of the school as a “premature relaxation” and declared, “This year’s Abitur [high school] examinations are not sustainable.” They emphasized, “People’s lives are at stake,” pointing out that “countless petitions, open letters, comments”

from student councils, school principals and the Philologists' Association oppose the policies of the Christian Democrat-Free Democrat state government under Armin Laschet (CDU).

This mood is also expressed on Twitter.

For example, the group "Gerechte Abschlüsse" ("Fair graduations") posts, "We as students consider it irresponsible that teachers in the risk group should now attend the oral examinations. This is not the way it works! Mrs Gebauer had claimed she wanted to protect this group, but now they are to be compulsorily deployed so that we students have trusted teachers in the examinations. Health comes first for us; such an about-face is irresponsible."

Yvonne Gebauer (FDP) is the minister of education in NRW and is particularly hated by pupils and teachers. In mid-April, at a special session of the Committee for Schools and Education in the NRW state parliament on the subject of "Resuming school operations" and the "resulting consequences," she cynically stated, "There will, sad as it is, be school communities that have to mourn the deaths of teachers, school administrators or family members, which can sometimes have a lasting effect on school life and everyday school life."

Suuyuki tweets angrily, "Since several children between the ages of 2 and 17 in the district of Bautzen have fallen ill with coronavirus, does it then make sense to send all primary and special needs pupils back to school without distancing rules?" She would support strikes by teachers, as "politics obviously takes no consideration" of their health.

Many see the irresponsible opening of schools as an experimental laboratory for the never officially declared, but *de facto*, pursued "herd immunity policy" of the federal government. For example, Hilde81 comments on the letter of the Leipzig teachers, "Finally, a letter that speaks from my heart." And she makes clear, "Schools and daycare centres, with their families and employees, are not a testing laboratory!!!"

FamilyM condemns the Saxony school policy: "Contact restrictions remain. Another household can meet outdoors following distancing rules. But school openings are being pushed through hard. An experiment in herd immunity? Children and their families as test subjects?"

Luke agrees, "Contact restrictions until June 5th, but schools to be used for herd immunity? How can school openings be justified?"

Michaela W. draws a comparison to the slaughterhouses, where hundreds of Eastern European

workers were infected because of the scandalous working and accommodation conditions. "Will schools soon resemble today's slaughterhouses?"

M.R., a teacher in a Berlin secondary school for five years and now working abroad, expressed his anger in an interview with the WSWS. "In the current situation, the government is putting the lives of teachers at risk and is experimenting with our children here." He strongly advised all parents to "absolutely leave their children at home" so as not to endanger them.

Stephanie, a secondary school pupil from Bavaria, told the WSWS, "The pupils have risk groups at home and some of them belong to this group themselves. Students are afraid of being the ones who bring the virus home and end up having to live with the guilty thought of having indirectly caused the death of a family member."

She adds, "All these lives are being put in danger because Germany wants to present itself as something? As what? As inhuman and undemocratic? It cannot be that the government ignores us like this."

But there is a brutal logic behind these premature school openings. It is part of the comprehensive "back to work" policy being pushed by all parties in the Bundestag (parliament) and by the trade unions to squeeze the gigantic sums that have gone to the financial elite in the coronavirus emergency packages out of the working class again. The ruling class is willing to walk over dead bodies for this. There is only one way out. To ensure that health and life are protected from the drive for profit, the working class and youth worldwide must organise themselves politically independently and turn to a socialist perspective .



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