

Workers in Germany report on corona virus infection risk in workplaces

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30 May 2020

New scientific findings suggest that aerosol infection is playing a greater role in the spread of the coronavirus than previously known. This was recently explained by Berlin virologist Christian Drosten on *Deutschlandradio*.

Drosten explained that aerosols are microparticles—i.e., exceptionally small suspended particles—that can remain in the air like a cloud for a long time in closed rooms and transmit the virus. This new knowledge about the infection mechanism is important, he said, because it requires a revision of the existing behavioural guidelines.

Staying in closed rooms, in particular, carries a high risk of infection. Constant, thorough ventilation is at least as important as wiping and disinfecting surfaces. In this context, Drosten warned against staying in crowded train compartments, trams and buses, but also in poorly ventilated classrooms, restaurants, offices and production spaces.

Instead of welcoming these findings and taking the warning seriously, a veritable smear campaign is taking place in the media against the Charité scientist, led—as so often when reactionary propaganda is involved—by tabloid *Bild-Zeitung*. In the interest of the economy, attempts are being made to intimidate and silence serious scientists in an effort to resume production despite the great danger of infection.

Against this background, the call by the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) to set up action committees to ensure safety in companies is gaining great importance. The SGP says:

“Without a careful plan to implement a safe return to work, based on science and rigorously enforced, there will be an enormous increase in the rate of infection, resulting in serious illness and death.

“The COVID-19 virus will spread rapidly through

factories, warehouses, office buildings, shopping malls and all other places where large numbers of people congregate. There is an immense danger that workers, unknowingly infected on the job and not yet showing symptoms, will return to their homes and neighbourhoods and transmit the disease to their families, loved ones and friends.”

These risks are very real. Transport workers from several cities have reported to the WSWs about completely inadequate coronavirus protection measures in bus and train operations.

From Munich, a tram driver describes how, despite protests by employees, trains with open cabs are still being used where the driver is not separated from the passenger compartment. Retrofitted Plexiglas walls offer just as little protection as the old felt curtains. When changing drivers, no additional time is allowed to thoroughly disinfect the driver’s cab. Providing enough ventilation and fresh air supply is also difficult.

In Berlin, Andy Niklaus had already pointed out serious safety deficiencies at public transit provider BVG in March. Although the ridiculous demarcation of the driver’s area using red and white tape has since been replaced by Plexiglas in some buses, even that does not provide any safety. It does not change the fact that drivers spend hours in a largely enclosed space with passengers and the risk of aerosol infection is extremely high.

Many so-called safety measures are purely placebo in nature and only exist in an effort to keep the anger of colleagues and passengers at the irresponsible behaviour of the BVG management under control.

Drivers are still being given face masks that do not meet the required standards and are permeable to the coronavirus. The World Health Organisation has warned against the use of these masks because they

give a false sense of security. Even the cleaning of the vehicles is still not carried out by professional cleaners equipped with special anti-virus disinfectants.

Meanwhile, the already poor hygienic conditions in the toilets at the turning points—if they exist at all—are still not being improved. Drivers at some turning points are not even able to wash their hands properly. Soap and paper towel dispensers are often empty. There is no disinfectant. There is also no testing of drivers, which is necessary to contain the virus.

A temporary worker from BMW in Leipzig described the catastrophic conditions at his workplace to the WSW. He had been working in the car factory's paint shop but did not want to continue there because of the danger of infection. His changing room and washroom were about 700 metres away from his workstation. He had to walk down long corridors and stairs, whose railings were not professionally cleaned, not to mention the doors and door handles.

There was only one toilet near his workstation, with only cold water and no disinfectant. In the past, he had worked in food processing companies for many years and knew very well that hygiene standards could be maintained. However, this also requires specialist companies that professionally disinfect all important rooms and transit points several times a day.

At the beginning of May, his temporary employment agency Adecco-Personaldienstleistungen informed him in a "Staff Information-BMW Leipzig" about the imminent resumption of shift work. As for safety measures, the usual hygiene rules were mentioned—maintaining a minimum distance, avoiding shaking hands and bodily contact, repeated hand washing and coughing into the crook of the arm.

The Adecco letter says, "The changing rooms and showers are closed until further notice due to the risk of infection. It is therefore recommended to put on work clothes at home." This is not feasible at all, the painter stressed, since he works in a so-called clean room, which must be kept dust-free. Also, it was an unreasonable demand to travel the long way to the plant in a work uniform. He would not do this under any circumstances.

A former salesman from a consumer electronics store in Rostock spoke to WSW reporters and welcomed the establishment of action committees to ensure safety in companies. "I think this is absolutely right and

important. Health must come first. Without the initiative of the employees, companies always think only about profit and not about the staff. If everything speaks against resuming work because the risk of people becoming infected is too great, why is this being enforced? How profit-hungry must a state be that does this to its people?"

Above all, coronavirus tests for all workers were important, because it was only by doing so that you could determine who was infected and who was not. "The government and authorities must provide medical masks that have been proven to be impervious to the virus free of charge to everyone," the former salesman said. "Infected people must not come into contact with healthy people, to effectively contain the pandemic. I firmly reject the issue of herd immunity; it leads to mass infection and countless victims."

The urgency for workers themselves to take the initiative to control and demand safety standards in their respective companies is shown by the constant stream of reports of infections in the workplace. Not only are mass infections in slaughterhouses and the meat industry increasing daily, but the number of those infected is also rising in courier services and at supplier companies.

At Hüttenwerke Krupp-Mannesmann (HKM) in Duisburg, seven workers tested positive for coronavirus. A statement by the management says, "The operational processes in the coking plant are not endangered by the coronavirus cases."

It was already known weeks ago that several employees of a Turkish subcontractor had tested positive at the large construction site of the Stuttgart 21 railway project. Quarantine was then ordered for more than 90 men. The magazine *FAKT* reported a dispute between the affected construction workers and their superiors. In it, the workers complained about conditions on the site. "We have said it several times, we need disinfectants," one of the men said critically. In response to the demand for masks, the company spokesman replied, "There are no masks."



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