

Workers disproportionately affected by coronavirus pandemic in Germany

Marianne Arens**20 July 2020**

The consequences of the coronavirus pandemic clearly display a class character. The disease particularly affects workers who do not have the opportunity to remain at home and maintain social distancing.

This is the conclusion of a study conducted by WIdO, the research institute of AOK, the largest German health insurer. The study documents who bore the heaviest burden of the pandemic during the lockdown: the nurses and caregivers in the clinics and retirement homes, the workers in the meat industry and millions employed in other sectors.

“The particular sections of the work force that continued going to work during the pandemic appear to be more strongly affected by COVID-19,” said Helmut Schröder, deputy director of the institute, at the July 8 presentation of the WIdO study. Particularly hard-hit were “professions requiring contact with other people, as well as professions in meat processing or warehousing.”

The study analyzed medical data from 11.6 million workers covered by AOK during the lockdown, which in Germany lasted from mid-March to mid-May. During this period, caregivers were most strongly affected by the coronavirus. In the elderly care field, 1.28 percent of all employees contracted COVID-19. Among nurses, the figure was 1.24 percent. Almost one in a hundred first responders fell ill with the disease.

By contrast, professions that were completely halted during the lockdown, such as gastronomy or cosmetics, as well as IT or administrative professions that could be carried out from a home office, were five times less strongly affected by the coronavirus. In university teaching and research, the rate was up to ten times lower than for caregivers, namely 0.11 percent or 110 people in 100,000. Because the study period ended in May, a large portion of teachers still belonged to one of the less affected professional groups.

Unfortunately, the figures from the study do not specifically tabulate workers in the metal, steel and electronics sectors, such as the auto and supplier industries. Nor are supermarket cashiers, parcel service providers, airport ground personnel, Amazon workers and employees in transportation specifically accounted for. The study likewise gives no indication how many of its subjects lost their lives to COVID-19.

From March to May, around 10,500 AOK-insured workers

became so ill from COVID-19 as to require hospitalization—that is almost one in a thousand, or 91 per 100,000. The rate was again high among nurses, with 157 out of 100,000 suffering a severe case.

In all, around 55,000 of the workers insured by AOK had medically certified cases of COVID-19. That is just under one in 200 (474 per 100,000, or nearly 0.5 percent). The rates were strikingly high among young workers: in the age group of those up to 20 years old, 0.7 percent of AOK-insured workers took sick leave with COVID-19.

Older workers, however, suffered more severe cases of the disease. The rate of hospital admission among AOK-insured workers over 60 was almost twice the average (168 per 100,000). Although the study excluded retirees, this demonstrates that the health of senior workers is subject to elevated risks even during their professional lives.

Indirectly, the study shows that those workers earning the least carry the greatest risk from the coronavirus pandemic. Workers in the meat industry were hit the hardest. Among them, 173 per 100,000 were hospitalized for COVID-19. Moreover, these statistics were generated before the massive outbreak at the Tönnies meatpacking plant in Gütersloh in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia.

“It remains to be seen whether differences in occupational groups becomes more pronounced due to outbreaks at individual companies,” commented WIdO deputy director Schröder. This is without doubt a reference to mass outbreaks like the one at Tönnies, where in June 1,553 employees tested positive for COVID-19, five of whom are still in intensive care and only surviving by means of artificial respiration. It remains unclear how many of these workers will survive and how many other meat industry workers will suffer the medical repercussions of COVID-19 for years to come.

In Rheda-Wiedenbrück, also in North Rhine-Westphalia, business leaders are working with local politicians to restart production as quickly as possible. The Higher Administrative Court in Münster on Thursday decided to lift lockdown restrictions on the two most affected districts.

Since Thursday, technicians at Tönnies are likewise back on the job. Full production is scheduled to restart July 17. By then, new hygienic protocols are to be developed. The responsible

district administrator, Sven-Georg Adenauer (Christian Democratic Union, CDU), grandson of the first postwar Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, assured the public that “constructive talks” were taking place with the company management.

Meanwhile, Federal Labor Minister Hubertus Heil (Social Democratic Party, SPD) claims it his intention to “clarify the contracts and temporary employment practice in the meat industry.” Heil made the assurance on the broadcaster RND that the government was working “at full steam” and would “not be stopped by lobby interests.” With regard to the recently assumed German European Union (EU) Council Presidency, Heil went so far as to promise an “appropriate minimum wage and good basic security” across Europe.

Heil’s SPD colleague Sigmar Gabriel recently made clear what this means. From March to the end of May 2020, Gabriel was hired by Clemens Tönnies as a highly paid consultant at the aforementioned meat processing plant. As recently as his tenure as Federal Minister of Economics and SPD Chairman, Gabriel had harshly criticized the contracts at Tönnies, describing them as a “shame for Germany.”

Inge Bultschneider, founder of Werkvertrag, is an eyewitness to the unspeakable living and working conditions for Eastern European contract workers at this company. In a short phone call with the *World Socialist Web Site*, Ms. Bultschneider described Gabriel as “the disappointment of a lifetime.” Gabriel had personally visited her five years ago when he was still the Federal Minister of Economics. “He was here,” she reported to the research magazine *Panorama*. “And he was super-interested and asked very specific questions.” She believed that this would be “the breakthrough” for the contract workers.

Instead, Gabriel was reined in by Clemens Tönnies almost immediately. After speaking with the billionaire meat baron, on February 3, 2015, Gabriel posted the following obsequious sentence on Facebook: “It is fascinating to see how quickly this company has grown. And it is good that Tönnies is setting standards in the positive sense in an industry that has always had to deal with black sheep.”

It is no surprise that Tönnies was then personally consulted and involved in the 2015 government decision on a “voluntary commitment” to comply with labor standards in the German meat industry. With this long-standing, trusted collaboration, Gabriel’s latest consultancy contract with Tönnies in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic is just the icing on the cake.

Heil’s promise will hardly end the exploitation of these workers. There are still 12-plus-hour shifts, the butchers and meat packers still do hard work in frigid temperatures. Their low-wage contracts are further diminished by excessive deductions for accommodation and transportation, while their housing is entirely substandard, and any reasonable health care is lacking. The pandemic has not created these abuses, which

have been rampant in the meat industry for decades, but only disclosed them.

New coronavirus outbreaks have barely been reported by the media. A developing hotspot is feared in the district neighboring the Tönnies plant: the Westphal meat company had to shut down its cutting and slaughterhouse in Herzebrock-Clarholz last week because a worker had contracted COVID-19. So far, he and two roommates, who also work at Westphal, have tested positive.

Not far away is Göttingen, where there have already been mass eruptions of COVID-19 in the Iduna apartment complex and in another high-rise. The nearby Friedland refugee transit camp has also been affected for over a week. At the end of June, 62 people were tested positive in the camp, 52 so-called “late repatriates” who came to Germany from Kazakhstan, seven employees of the facility and three asylum seekers. The camp, which traditionally accommodates immigrants from Russia and Kazakhstan, houses 123 asylum seekers, in addition to 191 late repatriates.

The daily figures from RKI, the German government agency and research institute responsible for disease control and prevention, do not come close to expressing the social dimension of the pandemic. Not only do they avoid giving a breakdown of the professional groups and social classes concerned. They are also undoubtedly underestimates, as there is still no systematic testing.

This was most recently demonstrated by the situation at a Catholic kindergarten in Friedrichshafen, in southern Germany. There, the director closed the facility on July 6, because so many children were sick. More than 40 children showed coronavirus symptoms. However, the authorities saw no need to have all 67 children and their educators tested for COVID-19, giving as a reason that especially in children, “various factors” could lead to a “generally perceived accumulation of respiratory symptoms.”



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