Coronavirus cases rise sharply in Austria

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Now that the Austrian government has lifted all restrictions to control the coronavirus, infection rates are rising sharply again. Last Thursday, the Ministry of Health in Vienna reported 157 positive SARS CoV2 tests. This is the highest number since April 10.

The number of confirmed infections per 100,000 inhabitants was 8.2 within seven days, more than twice as high as in neighbouring Germany with 3.0. The number of active COVID-19 cases has risen from below 400 to 1,315 since mid-June. The average number of positive tests is more than four times higher than in mid-June. At that time, the last protective measure against the pandemic had been lifted, ending the compulsory wearing of masks in shops and restaurants. Besides the capital Vienna, Upper Austria, Lower Austria and Styria are particularly affected by the increase.

The responsibility for the renewed expansion lies with the federal government under Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, a coalition of the right-wing conservative People's Party (ÖVP) and the Greens. Measures to contain the virus had been implemented for a short period in mid-March. But the government in Vienna was at the forefront in its "easing policy" as early as mid-April and then the "COVID-19 relaxation decree" lifted all restrictions. The Kurz government thus made it clear that it would not allow the economic interests of big business to be curtailed, although experts warned against a hasty relaxation of the protective measures.

Given the rapidly increasing numbers of infections, the head of the Austrian Medical Association, Thomas Szekeres, is calling for the reintroduction of compulsory masks in closed rooms. Viennese virologist Elisabeth Puchhammer-Stöckl has also long been against ending the compulsory wearing of masks. In Upper Austria and partly in Carinthia, the compulsory wearing of masks has been reintroduced in public places.

Although protecting the general population requires rapid and far-reaching measures, Chancellor Kurz merely told the Austrian daily newspaper *Österreich* at the weekend that it was necessary to "reintroduce the compulsory wearing of masks in certain areas." He wanted to discuss which areas would be affected by this with the responsible ministers.

Vice-Chancellor Werner Kogler (Greens) explained, "The consideration is that one should wear a mask again in the supermarket." However, Kogler strictly rejected a nationwide requirement to wear masks in public places.

Hardly a day passes without one or more further coronavirus clusters being discovered in the Alpine republic, with almost 9 million inhabitants. Most recently, at least 34 employees of the Dachsberger slaughterhouse in Eggenburg, Lower Austria, were infected. Over 240 people had to be quarantined. Just like the German slaughterhouse Tönnies, the catastrophic working conditions were responsible for the outbreak. The chain of infection could extend as far as the Czech Republic, from where numerous workers commute to the Austrian slaughterhouse.

At the beginning of July, around two dozen cases had occurred in a slaughterhouse near Linz. The plant was then closed for a short time. In Lower Austria, at least nine cases and 270 possible contacts occurred in a church in the town of Wiener Neustadt.

At the weekend, there were further cases in two Serbian Orthodox churches in Vienna, both of which were closed. A total of seven people had tested positive, including four priests and their family members. The churches are to be reopened as of August 1. Neither wearing face masks nor social distancing rules must be observed in the churches.

According to official figures, there have been a total of 20,000 confirmed coronavirus infections in Austria

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so far, and 711 people have died as a result.

The handling of the pandemic in schools and kindergartens is particularly irresponsible. Here, mass infections are being undeniably provoked, and no further countermeasures are taken.

After several cases of coronavirus in schools and kindergartens in Vienna, which led to the closure of the facilities, the Social Democrat-Green provincial government decided no more closures should be allowed in the interests of big business. The guidelines now merely stipulate that only children who display symptoms of illness should not attend school. All contact persons, including children in the same class or group, can continue to be taught or looked after.

At the same time, there is no obligation to have the child tested for a possible COVID-19 infection. Ursula Karnthaler, head of the medical crisis team, even explained that symptoms such as sneezing, or coughing do not yet need to be investigated, with a test carried out only when the disease has progressed so far that "the child can no longer follow the educational programme."

Further measures are then only taken when a child has a positive test result when close contacts must be quarantined for 14 days. The responsible crisis team justified this by saying schools and kindergartens almost only recorded "individual cases"; analyses had shown that hardly any infections could be attributed to educational institutions.

Only two weeks ago, schools and kindergartens in Linz and Wels in Upper Austria had to be closed for days after several cases had occurred. Moreover, few tests are carried out in a targeted manner to keep the numbers low. The Green Health Minister Rudolf Anschober had to admit that recently only about 10,000 tests were being carried out daily. At the end of March, Anschober's ministry had declared that it wanted to carry out between 15,000 and 17,000 tests daily.

Clinics and nursing homes are particularly affected by the rising number of cases. For example, one-third of the people in Austria who have died of COVID-19 or in which it was a contributing factor were residents of nursing homes. Lack of protective equipment and too few tests are mainly responsible for this, as the Bundesverband Lebenswelt Heim association of old age and care homes commented at the beginning of July. The consequences were "uncontrolled infections in nursing homes." According to the president of the federal association, Markus Mattersberger, there were only four healthy nurses left in one facility to look after 30 residents.

While the population is being exposed to the dangers of the pandemic in the interests of big business, the latter is using the crisis to attack wages and jobs. Austrian Lufthansa subsidiary AUA, for example, is receiving state support from a €600 million aid package. At the same time, the workforce is to be reduced to 80 percent of its current size by 2022, cutting 1,100 jobs. Moreover, the remaining AUA employees are to face salary cuts totalling €300 million. According to AUA management, the loss of wages will amount to 13 to 15 percent for each employee. Currently, large parts of the workforce are on short-time working, which is already leading to considerable losses.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, unemployment in Austria has risen sharply, especially in the retail, catering and education sectors. While 400,000 people were out of work at the end of February 2020, the number had risen to 463,500 by the end of June. Women, often single parents who have already worked in precarious conditions, are particularly affected. The number of short-time workers, which had fallen in recent weeks, has also risen by more than 50,000 within one week.

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