

Germany reopens its schools: An experiment in herd immunity

Marianne Arens
11 August 2020

Although there are currently more than 1,000 new coronavirus infections per day in Germany, all of the country's state governments are ruthlessly enforcing school openings after the summer break. This can only be called an experiment in "herd immunity"—a policy with potentially lethal consequences for children, teachers, teaching assistants and their families.

Last Thursday, the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) reported 1,045 new infections and on Friday 1,147 new infections. These figures refer to infections measured about 10 days ago. This means that the current rate of infection is very likely much higher. There are over 19 million cases of SARS-CoV-2 worldwide, more than 712,000 people have already died, and in Germany the number of deaths rose to 9,183 on Friday.

In this situation, all state governments are determined to send children back to school without restrictions. This is despite the fact that the increase in new infections has reached a level equivalent to that of mid-March 2020, when all schools and day-care centres were closed and the lockdown was imposed. Now, however, all of these facilities are being reopened. The goal is very clear: get the population back to work so that profit-making can resume and stock markets can soar even higher. Politicians of all stripes and business representatives leave no doubt about their intentions.

Annalena Baerbock, chairwoman of Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, stated categorically in the ARD television morning program on Friday, "What must be clear is the top guideline: that schools should never again be completely closed as a first measure." With this statement, the Green Party leader echoed the demand of Siemens boss Joe Kaeser, who categorically told the newspaper *Die Welt*, "We certainly cannot afford a complete shutdown anymore." The newspaper commented that Kaeser was "absolutely right: there

must not be a procedure based on the motto 'Operation successful, patient dead.' (The patient here is clear: the German economy.) And further: "The fact that day-care centres and schools are closed first and open last must not happen a second time."

What politicians, managers and journalist are demanding are conditions that will lead to thousands of illnesses and deaths. Just to recall, it was school closures in particular that helped to contain the pandemic initially and prevent deaths. As the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA) documented in a study, in the last two weeks of March about 40,600 lives were saved thanks to the closure of schools worldwide. Without the four weeks of school closures from mid-March to mid-April, nearly 1.4 million more people would have been infected worldwide.

On Friday it was announced that there have already been cases of coronavirus at a minimum of at least two schools in the state of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania where classes recommenced last Monday. After a high school teacher in Ludwigslust and a primary school pupil in Graal-Müritz tested positive, both schools had to be closed again.

In Hamburg, where classes restarted last Thursday, the number of COVID-19 infections is rising sharply. According to official figures, there were 80 new cases from Thursday to Friday. In addition to a number of persons returning from travel, workers at the Hamburg shipyard Blohm+Voss have tested positive. On Wednesday, 60 new infections were detected among shipyard workers and employees of contractors at the shipyard.

Despite all this, teachers and pupils in Hamburg are being forced to attend classes. While the RKI insists on its "AHA" rules for social distancing, handwashing and

wearing of masks, pupils will sit together in full classes, without mouth-and-nose protection and any possibility of keeping the proscribed distance of 1.5 metres. In some schools, windows cannot be opened properly, although the aerial emissions from a sick person (as a video simulation from the TU Berlin shows) can fill an entire classroom in just two minutes.

Children, teachers and parents are protesting against the opening up policy and have expressed their anger and sarcasm on Twitter. One wrote: “What is the point of the RKI if even our Ministers of Culture don’t follow its recommendations? School opening without an AHA rule is not merely a case of negligence. It borders on intentional infection.” Others call the ministers of culture “the supreme Corona deniers” and warn: “Do not then say anybody, we could have known the consequences!”

More than 20 teachers have taken legal action against being forced to attend classes. A number of teachers had already undertaken legal complaints in April and May, but in vain. Now the Education Ministry in Schleswig-Holstein has gone so far as to appeal against a ruling. The Administrative Court in Schleswig had ruled in the case of a teacher suffering from lung disease that she should not be forced to attend classes for the time being. The Education Ministry has appealed against the judgment.

An open letter to the mayors of Hamburg, Peter Tschentscher (SPD) and Katharina Fegebank (Greens), as well as the senators for schools and social affairs, Ties Rabe and Melanie Leonhard (both SPD), was signed by more than 800 parents on the first day of reopened schools. The letter opposes the policy, arguing that “a safe and orderly start of school is not possible.” The parents write that they are naturally concerned about the welfare of children and their socio-psychological development. “But the welfare of the child is not possible without health protection.” They demand “urgent improvements to the concept presented!”

It is false, however, to expect the SPD and the Greens, who govern in the city-state of Hamburg, to take such proposals seriously. Hamburg’s school senator Ties Rabe, for example, never tires of repeating his claim that coronavirus is “safer for children and young people than flu.” Against all evidence to the contrary, Rabe declares in a school-start video that

children are “not as much at risk as adults.”

The Left Party, which governs in Thuringia, Berlin and Bremen, and the teachers’ union GEW, also cannot be trusted. They are all ruthlessly pushing ahead with the opening of schools because they put the interests of the economy above the life and health of the working population. It is the same politicians who agreed to pump hundreds of billions and trillions of euros of “pandemic emergency aid” into the vaults of banks and corporations.

The *World Socialist Web Site*, the Socialist Equality Party and its sister parties across the world reject this dangerous experiment. We call on young people, as well as teachers, educators and parents, to take action and fight against it.

In a statement published on July 6 on the WSWs, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in the US calls for a “nationwide general strike against the reopening of schools.” In order to organize and make such a movement successful, teachers have to “build independent action committees,” “unite with other sections of the working class” and take up a struggle for the transformation of society according to socialist principles.

“All the rights of the working class, even the right to life, depend upon the expropriation of the ruling class and the reorganization of economic life on the basis of social need, not private profit” the SEP writes and continues, “The only way to halt the reopening of schools, stop the spread of the pandemic and prevent millions more infections and deaths is through the mass mobilization of the working class in a revolutionary struggle against the source of all suffering wrought by the pandemic, the capitalist system.”



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact