

Mounting opposition against school openings in Germany

Carola Kleinert, Gregor Link
14 August 2020

According to official figures, the coronavirus pandemic is now claiming around 6,000 lives worldwide every day. In the US alone, the virus is killing nearly 1,500 people every day. Although the number of new daily infections in Germany is at its highest level in three months, with 1,226 cases on Tuesday, Berlin's Senator for Education Andrea Scheeres (SPD) allowed schools to reopen on Monday based on compulsory attendance and full operation.

At the same time, the Berlin state government, consisting of a coalition of the SPD, Left Party and the Greens, has waved aside the scientifically required minimum distance of 1.50 meters to protect against infection. More than 370,000 students at Berlin's schools, together with 87,000 apprentices, plus all of their teachers, returned to full classes without mask protection at the beginning of this week.

The states of Brandenburg, Hamburg and Schleswig-Holstein also resumed regular schooling on Monday. Schools reopened in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania last week and in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany's most populated state, on Wednesday this week.

The red-red-green Berlin state government led by Mayor Michael Müller and Education Senator Sandra Scheeres (both SPD) has—contrary to the reservations expressed by serious virologists—unashamedly capitulated to the demands of big business: in order for companies to benefit from the labour of parents, their children must return to school at all costs.

This is clearly outlined in a joint statement of the Chamber of Industry and Commerce (IHK), the Hotel and Restaurant Federation (Dehoga), the Trade Association and Employer's Federations (UVB) last Saturday: "It is in the interest of entrepreneurs and their coworkers that their children are again reliably educated and cared for." According to the business bosses, it is "high time that the regular operation of Berlin schools starts up again."

There has been an angry response in social media to such statements and the state government's policy of opening up schools. Kathy, a Berlin teacher, explained on Twitter: "The welfare of children is constantly being cited as the main reason for opening schools." The demands of the business federations, she continued, are "incredibly inhuman." One of Kathy's colleagues notes: "The UVB is apparently the association to

which Scheeres and the Senate report directly."

Jasmin, a primary school teacher in Berlin, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the conditions at her school and what should be done. She described the plan of the Berlin state government as "completely ridiculous." In its "model hygiene plan," she said, the Berlin Senate decreed "that rooms should be properly aired for several minutes at least once per lesson and during breaks. However, prior to the summer holiday, many windows could not be opened properly for security reasons. But narrow and poorly ventilated rooms offer ideal conditions for COVID-19 to spread."

Twitter user Dieter R. has a similar view. He writes about the hypocritical reminder by Family Minister Franziska Giffey to regularly air schools: "In many schools the windows cannot be opened at all because otherwise they would fall out! In whole corridors one cannot even put windows on tilt! And what good is it anyway to tilt windows in a class of 30 kids? There is hardly any fresh air in the classroom and no ventilation. This is all just a bad excuse—like the alleged measures agreed by the KMK [Conference of Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs]."

Even regular hand washing and disinfecting remain "as chaotic as it was prior to the summer holidays," Jasmin points out. "Our school has only one cleaner for the entire school building, just like before the pandemic! For less than 11 euros per hour he cleans from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m.—after he has finished with the last toilet, he can start all over again. The very dirty toilets and rooms are horrific and exceed one's best efforts. The school washrooms are cleaned around midday—although that should really be done in the morning. Sometimes there is only one functioning sink and soap dispenser. In the rooms themselves, the floor is only swept once a day by the cleaner."

The teachers and education assistants, according to Jasmin, have to take on cleaning duties in addition to their existing duties. For example, "before and after each break in the yard" they have to ensure "that primary school children wash their hands thoroughly in the washrooms individually." They are also responsible for disinfecting the premises and surfaces: "During our breaks, we have to disinfect all surfaces after each change of class. In the computer rooms, all keyboards, mice and monitors must be disinfected after every use. Teachers

have to use their breaks between classes for cleaning and watching over toilets.”

In a statement to the WSW, Ingo R., the head of the classroom care team in his child’s class, criticised the lack of cooperation between parents and school staff: “I think it’s a pity that many head teachers don’t engage in proper dialogue with parents,” he said. “I have met many parents who would have liked to have transferred the technical tools of the working world to the world of school.”

But while many teachers, parents and students are opposed to opening schools under unsafe conditions, the Berlin school authorities are arrogantly ignoring these concerns. Instead, Scheeres announced the establishment of a “Hygiene Advisory Board,” consisting of doctors, child psychologists, parents, students and politicians, i.e., with the exclusion of teachers, which is to meet in a “working group.”

“So instead of measures backed by medical experts, there will first be a working group,” Sven D., a Berlin teacher, noted on Facebook. “Then they have won time again to do nothing. And then to make sure they don’t get any work afterwards, they gather together groups of people who represent the ‘right’ positions. This virus was first detected in Germany over six months ago, more than 9,200 people have since died, including pupils and teachers—and now a working group is being set up. This administration is unwilling to work and is prepared to go over dead bodies with its laziness and incompetence.”

His colleague Andreas S. writes: “Why hasn’t money been pumped into the school system for months? Not even now, when oversized classes, small classrooms, a lack of ventilation systems and lack of equipment become life-threatening?”

Based on the findings of international leading virologists and epidemiologists the WSW has repeatedly warned that the specific conditions prevail in businesses and schools provide optimal conditions for so-called “superspreading” events. The virologist at Berlin’s Charité hospital, Christian Drosten, along with many other scientists, has repeatedly stated that appropriate distance rules and the use of personal protective masks in closed rooms are indispensable to prevent mass outbreaks and chains of infections affecting hundreds of people.

The Berlin Senate’s hygiene concept is not only inadequate, it also fails in practice due to the conditions prevailing in schools. “The formation of smaller groups and the prevention of the mixing of different class groups, which the school authorities stress, will be jettisoned at the latest in the afternoon based on the after-school care system,” Jasmin noted. “There are neither fixed groups nor compulsory masks provided in after-school care. Even if teachers use empty classrooms for after-school care, it is not possible to maintain the group structures existing from previous lessons, because there is not enough care personnel.”

If an infection becomes known in a class group, she continues, “it is the public health department which decides on appropriate quarantine measures. Until this decision is made,

only the affected student is quarantined. All others must continue to be educated normally, including any siblings scattered over several classes.”

The crowded public transportation system in the city of Berlin, which most students use to get to school, is another major problem.

There is widespread anger and despair at the decisions and actions of the school authorities. According to a survey conducted by the ARD Press Club, 56 percent of all respondents consider school “normal operation without distance rules” to be irresponsible.

Another contribution by a Berlin teacher on Twitter is significant: “This school in normal operation is a time bomb, now lessons are due to recommence for a while,” she writes, “When you walk through the narrow corridors, you can almost hear the ticking.”

Her colleague Verena apparently speaks for many when she writes: “What is being demanded by politicians now is completely inhumane. Even with a mild progression of the disease, no one really knows what the long-term damage will be. In the end, everyone is at risk of being infected and no one can predict how the virus will actually affect each individual. When the only priorities are ‘education’ and capitalism, I believe we have lost all of our important values.”

“Moreover, there is no guarantee that you will receive a proper education by putting oneself and the lives of loved ones at risk,” she adds ironically.

Jasmin also emphasises the social impact on poor families and their children: “Many students—especially those from poorer families—do not have laptops and pads. Solutions and learning concepts have been available for years: More social staff and translators to work as family helpers, smaller learning groups, more rooms, more teaching staff, better cleaning and equipment of schools. Schools and teachers have suffered huge cuts and are now being pushed into the experimental field of herd immunity, with serious consequences.”

Against this background, Jasmin makes an urgent appeal to her colleagues: “Teachers should refuse to work under these circumstances and go on strike until their demands for smaller classes and more support at all levels of school life are met. This includes cleaning staff, family helpers, translators and other support staff. Free recreational activities should also be organized for children and psychological support services should be established. The money is there. Tax the rich!”



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