

German students establish action committee against school reopenings

Philipp Frisch
28 August 2020

In the fight against the dangerous return to schools under unsafe conditions, students in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) have taken an important step to protect their classmates, teachers and their families. At the School Centre in Dortmund's Hacheney district, they founded an action committee on Sunday to link students and teachers together to take action against the school reopening and ensure safe teaching conditions.

The two founding members, Berdan and Jan, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the founding of the committee and the situation in Dortmund schools. Both see the committee primarily as a response to the ruthless policy of reopening schools. When Berdan came back from vacation two weeks ago, he immediately saw that the reopening of schools was putting all those involved in danger. "I thought to myself, 'We can't go on like this! I must do something!'"

He had been aware that as an individual he could not change the situation. "I then looked for like-minded people and started talking to my friends. I immediately agreed with some of them. I also talked to Jan and it was clear to us that something had to be done," he says. "I had already searched the Internet for information and found the SGP's [Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei, Socialist Equality Party] call to 'Stop school reopenings,' which I could agree with in every respect. Then I read other articles, including the American SEP resolution on the issue at the WSWs, and discussed the material with my friends. On Sunday, we decided to form the committee."

On Monday, they started to put up posters and distribute leaflets at their school, calling on classmates and teachers to oppose the reopening of the school and participate in the committee. They also put up the poster for the IYSSE's online event on the topic next Sunday. "Right on the first day, our campaign attracted a lot of attention. Especially the posters and the headline 'Stop the school reopenings! Prepare for a general strike!' have led to

some discussions with classmates, many of whom have said that they see things the same way," Jan reports on her experiences on Monday.

So far, the committee has five members. Berdan and Jan are in contact with other interested classmates, also at other Dortmund schools, and teachers. "Some of them immediately said that they wanted to join in. Others are still reluctant, but have said that they support us," said Berdan.

The two attend different vocational schools within the Hacheney School Centre, where many prospective nurses go to school, some of whom would be on the front line in health care facilities. They themselves take their school-leaving exams there with a focus on health. They founded the committee not only out of concern for the health of their classmates and teachers, but also because of their families.

Both Jan and Berdan have relatives who were in the risk group. "My mother has lung disease," explains Berdan. "Her work as a cleaner is hard enough for her anyway, then her lungs—I don't want her to get infected with the coronavirus." Jan adds, "I also want to protect my family, there are also cases of risk, and at the same time, of course, I want classes to be organised in such a way that we don't miss anything and, above all, that we don't put ourselves in danger."

So far, the committee has made two central demands. The first is that lessons should only take place online or in small, fixed learning groups that are physically separated and safely housed. However, the second demand is that face-to-face instruction in small groups should only take place at all if the transportation companies increase the use of buses and trains to such an extent that safe travel is possible.

Jan and Berdan are most worried about the situation in public transport. "Here, 6,000 to 7,000 students arrive daily and only very few of them have their own car. Some

teachers are also using public transport. We all start at about the same time in the morning. The situation on the buses and trains is catastrophic. People cannot keep their distance.” Jan took a photo that leaves no doubt that buses and trains are becoming breeding grounds for the virus.

Her description makes it clear that a rapid spread of the virus among students and teachers is practically pre-programmed even in the current regular operation of schools and is only a matter of time.

“According to the rules and regulations, things are not running here as they should,” says Jan, “I myself can observe at least five rule violations per day. When collecting worksheets, for example, teachers and students regularly get close to each other. Often, social distancing here cannot be maintained at all. Moreover, Berdan reports that it is not possible to ventilate the building properly because of defective or locked windows.”

“In old classrooms, where we still were until recently, sometimes only one or two windows opened. Some classrooms are completely blocked off, which makes everything even tighter,” Berdan continues.

This fits the overall picture. *Der Spiegel* recently reported on a study that examined 363 classrooms in NRW. It found around half of classrooms would have to be closed because, after just one class with the windows closed, there was so much carbon dioxide (CO₂)—and thus potentially dangerous aerosols—in the room that they would have to be classified as unhygienic under current occupational safety regulations.

Berdan and Jan also described how coronavirus cases at schools were handled in a completely irresponsible manner. Jan said, “If someone is suspected of being infected, there is a quick test. If the test is negative, people are sent back to class. If the test is positive, those people are quarantined, but only they. This contradicts all scientific recommendations because students may have become infected in the days before the test of the positive student and spread the virus in the classroom, on trains and at home.”

The reports of Jan and Berdan coincide with conditions described by school principals in NRW, who recently commented on the desperate situation in their schools in a letter to NRW state Premier Armin Laschet.

In their letter, the principals complain that the regulation from the Education Ministry completely ignored the reality at schools. The public, however, was “led to believe that the MSB [Ministry for School and Education] works responsibly, with foresight and prudence.”

Berdan and Jan reported that they had also spoken with

teachers. “One of my teachers told me about her situation. I found it incredible,” Berdan explained. “Before the Easter vacations, she belonged to a risk group and was sent home accordingly. She had had surgery and then suffered from an immune deficiency. She also lives in a house with her parents, also a risk group. In the meantime, the rules have been changed so that she is no longer in the risk group and has to go to school.

“She told me what she thought. The rules would simply be changed to keep the number of teachers who are not allowed to attend classes as small as possible. The state’s concern is about training new workers, she says, and this should not be interrupted. Old people wouldn’t matter anyway, because they could no longer serve the economy.”

In the end, Jan and Berdan made an appeal to teachers, students and parents to take part in the fight against school reopenings and get in touch with them. “From a moral point of view, what is happening in schools at the moment is quite reprehensible,” Berdan said. “More schools and also companies and factories should form action committees to prevent worse things from happening.” Jan added, “Our committee is open to anyone who agrees that the reopening of schools, as it is happening now, must be stopped.”

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei and its youth organisation, the IYSSE, are holding an online event next Sunday to discuss the creation of action committees against the reopening of schools to which all are invited. “These murderous policies can only be stopped by the independent mobilisation of all workers in a nationwide general strike,” the statement announcing the meeting says.

The event will also be attended by representatives of the SGP’s international sister parties, who are also fighting to build action committees in their countries and help workers network internationally on the basis of a socialist perspective.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact