

Network of Action Committees for Safe Education holds first online meeting

Stop the dangerous “routine operation” of schools in Germany! Prepare a nationwide general strike!

Our reporters
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Under conditions of a dangerous increase in coronavirus infections in Germany and Europe, and the unrestricted opening of schools and childcare facilities in “routine operation,” the Network of Action Committees for Safe Education held its first online meeting on Monday.

The meeting’s moderator, Katerina Selin, a member of the Socialist Equality Party (SGP) and its youth organisation, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, opened the meeting by saying, “Opposition to these government policies is growing worldwide. We called this meeting to discuss the strategy and initiatives required to fight the dangerous reopening of schools amid the pandemic.”

Selin said that the meeting gives conscious political expression to the widespread opposition among students, teachers, parents, and workers, and aims to create a platform to share experiences at schools and begin the construction of action committees. This and subsequent meetings will assist, she continued, in “connecting and coordinating action committees in Germany and internationally.” Students, education workers, and leading SGP members participated in the meeting.

Christoph Vandreier, deputy leader of the SGP, stated in his opening report:

“Although infections are on the rise, all measures to contain the pandemic are being eased or abolished. At the beginning of the school year, all measures developed in the schools by teachers and pedagogues were abandoned. Even the requirements to wear masks and maintain social distancing have been lifted in classrooms.”

Vandreier continued, “Under these conditions, the rapid spread of the pandemic is not only probable, but inevitable. Infections have already been reported at over 1,000 schools and 300 childcare facilities.

“The same politicians now shedding crocodile tears about the consequences of school closures have actually spent recent decades cutting education budgets to the bone and are responsible for the growth of poverty and inequality in education. They have done virtually nothing to protect working-class families in any way from the pandemic. The hopeless social situation these politicians have themselves produced is now being exploited to place their very lives

at risk. The reality is that the main concern in reopening schools is the protection of the profits of big business.”

Referring to the imminent layoffs in the industrial and retail sectors, Vandreier added, “We are experiencing a general assault by the ruling elite on working people. The pandemic has exposed the fact that even the most basic interests of the workers are irreconcilable with the capitalist profit system.” Workers must oppose this general assault, Vandreier stressed, with a general strike. It is critical for workers in Germany, Europe, and internationally to organise independent action committees in order to fight for their demands, said the speaker.

Philipp Frisch, an SGP member and a teacher in North Rhine-Westphalia, spoke on the historic evolution of the trade unions and the specific role played by the Education and Science Union (GEW):

“The more the resistance among teachers, students, and parents grows, the stronger become the efforts of the trade unions to sabotage it. The GEW cooperates closely in this with the state governments. Many of their officials are members of the government parties and sit as deputies in the state parliaments and federal parliament. The trade union supports the reopening of schools and is enforcing this on the ground. And in the current round of collective bargaining, the trade unions have not raised a single coronavirus-related demand.”

In reality, Frisch continued, the unions are drafting plans for mass layoffs with the government and big business in industry, and real wage cuts in social and health care services.

“The GEW treats teachers, students and parents who belong to a ‘risk group’ with particular cynicism. They inform those concerned about the ‘duty of care’ borne by the authorities, even though it is now crystal clear that public authorities and service providers are disregarding this across the board,” added Frisch.

The third speaker was Gregor Link, a member of the IYSSE and reporter for the *World Socialist Web Site*, who detailed the development of the pandemic globally and the mounting resistance among teachers, students and parents to the reopening of schools.

While the number of new infections in schools across Germany is rising, said Link, colleges and universities in the United States are emerging as epicentres of the pandemic.

“At the University of Michigan, over 1,000 graduate students voted overwhelmingly by 80 percent after a four-day strike to continue the

strike for a further week. They are receiving support from university employees, autoworkers, and even lecturers, and many people have joined the picket lines.”

Link referred to action committees recently formed by teachers and students in Dortmund, Britain, and the United States. He quoted the statement of the American Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee:

“Once again, it is up to the working class to take emergency action. The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is fighting to unite all workers—educators, school bus drivers, janitors, maintenance workers and other support staff, with manufacturing, health care, logistics, grocery and food processing, retail and restaurant workers—to carry out a nationwide general strike to prevent the reopening of schools and save lives.”

Joshua, a student from Nuremberg, agreed with this: “I think the statement calling for the building of action committees is very important, because neither the trade unions nor the parliamentary parties represent the interests of students and teachers. They just serve the interests of big business so that the labour power of parents is available once again,” he said in the discussion that followed the reports.

“Public transportation is extremely overcrowded. In a bus or subway car intended for 30 people, up to 100 students are crammed in,” he added. While disinfectant is no longer available in public places, the hygiene situation in schools is no less catastrophic, he continued. “The toilets are not cleaned and disinfected as required. This is extremely dangerous!”

“It has been well known for months that the classrooms are far too small,” continued Joshua. “Today, we had a natural science class for the first time, and although we are a relatively small class with about 20 people, additional tables had to be brought in. Under these conditions, it’s just not possible to maintain social distancing.” Most windows cannot be opened to ventilate the classrooms, he added, and soon there will no longer be a requirement to wear a mask in class.

“The treatment of the risk groups is an outrage, dangerous, and bordering on physical assault. My father belongs to a risk group as he suffers from high blood pressure and reduced lung capacity. But because this allegedly only ‘slightly’ increases his risk of severe symptoms, I can’t be freed from the obligation to attend in-person classes. One of my classmates is in a similar situation. We all confront the same problems,” he concluded.

Jasmin, a teacher from Berlin who also belongs to a risk group, spoke next.

“I believe that there are many unreported instances of teachers in risk groups who fear filing a claim because they face so much pressure from the media and the authorities,” she said. “They are morally blackmailed and bullied into going to work. This has been my experience in my school.

“I am the only one in my school who registered and obtained a doctor’s note. In the process, I had to fight the dissatisfaction of the school’s director and a section of my co-workers, which was a tremendous burden. But when I look around at my colleagues, I see several who had major surgery or were seriously ill over recent years and are thus at high risk.”

“The so-called career changers, to which I also belong, face similar problems,” added Jasmin. “In my case, I will supposedly be expelled from the study programme I do in tandem with my job, because I can’t participate in in-person teaching and have thus ‘breached my contract.’ And this is in spite of the fact that I’m not sitting around

for hours on end watching Netflix, but working from home with two children.” The children, Jasmin added, also face bullying “that one doesn’t like to think about.”

“For us, the absurd situation began in April, when the childcare facilities were operating on an emergency service,” said Martin, a childcare worker from Dresden. “Instead of allowing the childcare workers to isolate at home as a safety measure, all personnel were ordered into the institutions to carry out largely unnecessary work, even though there were far fewer children to look after. We were also supposed to accumulate overtime and take our holidays.”

“The reopening of businesses and childcare facilities is being accompanied by a dishonest media campaign that makes childcare workers responsible for the children allegedly feeling ‘isolated’ or ‘bored’ at home,” stated Martin. “Suddenly, more concern is being shown for the children in ‘problem families’ than during the last decade as a whole.

“Then, under conditions of the lockdown, an absurd and pseudo-scientific study on infection rates among children was carried out and sweeping generalisations were made: childcare facilities and schools do not greatly contribute to the spread of the virus. This made major headlines and was immediately seized upon by the national newspapers and the government.”

Martin added that the problems with ventilation and hygiene are at least as bad as in schools. “Even before the pandemic, the personnel ratios were disastrous. According to research, 70 percent of children were not appropriately cared for,” he added. For this reason, Martin said he “wholeheartedly” supports the formation of committees in schools, childcare facilities, and businesses.

Towards the end of the meeting, a mother from Wolfsburg stated her support for the demands raised by the committees. However, she said that she took another position on the larger political issues. Vandreier responded by stressing once again the importance of the political analysis, before emphasising that all workers could participate in the committees if they wanted to fight against the ‘routine operation’ of schools on the basis of the statement.

In conclusion, Vandreier drew attention to the rapid strengthening of far-right forces and the fate of refugees following the fire at the Moria camp in Greece. As with the coronavirus pandemic, these events show just as clearly how the ruling elite is prepared to trample over corpses to defend their interests. “We are witnessing the sharpening of class tensions at every level of society,” he said.



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