

COVID-19 in Germany: No protection for high-risk groups despite dramatic increase in infections

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Since the September reopening of schools in all German states, the number of COVID-19 cases has increased rapidly. As in other European countries, the number of infections in Germany is reaching dramatic highs. Schoolchildren, teachers and educators are being exposed to mortal danger.

On Friday the number of new infections reached the highest level since April, with 2,500 new cases. Although the school year only began in the last weeks, according to the *Bild* newspaper around 50,000 students are currently in quarantine. "This number shows that we are still in the middle of the pandemic and it is again having a large impact on school operations," Federal Education Minister Anja Karliczek (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) told the newspaper. The minister deliberately neglected to mention that she herself was a driving force behind the unsafe reopening of schools.

The President of the German Teachers' Association, Heinz-Peter Meidinger, recently warned of a further increase in the number of infections in schools. "According to the German Teachers' Association, the current high of 50,000 students will more than double in the next three months, and probably even quadruple," said Meidinger, suggesting a nearly uncontrollable outbreak.

In light of this development, more medical professionals are warning that the number of deaths related to coronavirus infection will likewise significantly increase. "The number of deaths will continue to rise in the coming weeks," President of the German Interdisciplinary Association for Intensive Care and Emergency Medicine (Divi), Uwe Janssens, told the newspaper of the Funke media group.

For days, double-digit deaths have been reported in Germany. Since the victims were infected on average roughly five weeks earlier, an increase in deaths is expected with the same time lag.

But even in the face of these developments the federal government is holding its deadly course and presenting the opening of schools and companies as an unavoidable necessity. The reckless policy of the government is most clearly demonstrated in its handling of those at high risk of severe COVID-19 illness due to pre-existing medical conditions. Public pressure partially protected these high-risk groups at earlier stages of the pandemic through paid leave of absences, remote working, etc. Now, however, these individuals are being exposed to enormous risk with their return to work and the opening of schools and day-cares.

The teaching practices painstakingly developed by educators at schools, universities and day-cares during the lockdown have been thrown overboard in order to restart traditional operation. Jessica, 39, is a teacher from Berlin who is studying part-time. She began remote learning in mid-March and was able to take her first exam in July. But since receiving an exemption from classroom teaching, her studies have been discontinued because they are no longer "part-time." Like Jessica, high-risk individuals nationwide have to choose between their livelihoods and health. They either stay at home and protect themselves and their families and face impoverishment or put themselves at enormous risk to finance their existence. "This is blackmail!" concluded Jessica.

Her case is not the exception. Nationwide, thousands of teachers who belong to high-risk groups have

submitted applications for suspension of compulsory attendance, only a fraction of which have been approved. The broadcaster NDR reports that in the state of Schleswig-Holstein alone, 1,600 teachers claimed elevated risk of severe infection and were therefore unable to teach face-to-face. Only 30 of these applications were approved.

In the *Berliner Zeitung*, a teacher from Berlin reports struggling to protect his life and health in the face of the pandemic. Despite presenting a certificate from his family doctor strictly forbidding him from conducting face-to-face classes due to several heart operations and ventricular fibrillation, he was required to visit a state-commissioned occupational medicine facility.

“It was clear to me from the start that this doctor did not want to confirm my illness—I can only speculate why,” the vocational school teacher reported. The doctor put the teacher under pressure and initially refused to confirm the disease, even intimidating the teacher and threatening to break off the appointment. It was only when the teacher became so upset that the doctor recognized his high blood pressure and heard his heart murmurs that the teacher’s absence from school was approved.

One can suspect that teachers with previous illnesses are being pressured not to exempt themselves from classroom teaching. The percentage of educators not teaching in person—5.6 percent among vocational trainers and 3.1 percent in general education—is extremely low. Teachers’ associations and unions had previously presumed 15 percent.

The action committee founded by students and teachers in Dortmund uncovered similar cases. There, a teacher with a significant immune deficiency has to teach in person. This trend can be seen across Germany. The range of conditions defined as high-risk for serious COVID-19 disease, exempting one from classroom teaching, has been reduced significantly. Those over 60, suffering from high blood pressure or other mild to moderate illnesses usually must return to schools and day-cares.

It was sheer farce when Health Minister Jens Spahn (CDU) declared that there should be special measures in the future to minimize the dangers for high-risk groups. “It is important that we continue to protect particularly high-risk groups and advance concepts to do so in everyday life,” said the CDU politician, at the

same time speaking out against extended mask requirements.

These are the conditions under which students and teachers are returning to schools. The consequences are clearly devastating. Schools cannot be made safe under the present conditions.

Problems begin on the way to school. Most students and teachers travel by over-filled public transport. Subway cars intended for 30 to 40 people are often packed with well over 100. Students from different classes intermingle on the way to class and during the breaks. Classrooms measuring 30–40 square metres (300–400 square feet) cannot guarantee safe distancing for 25 to 30 students. Moreover, mask requirements have been abolished in most federal states. There is nothing stopping the spread of the virus.

Thus high-risk individuals are being exposed to mortal danger and the state governments refuse to lift a finger. North Rhine-Westphalia Education Minister Yvonne Gebauer of the liberal Free Democratic Party explained that special ventilation systems, recommended by leading virologists because they filter aerosols, are too expensive and therefore not an option. A ventilation system costs around €3,000.

Gebauer’s statement makes clear the value placed by the ruling class on saving human lives. While hundreds of billions of euros have been transferred to banks and large corporations through the Corona rescue packages, €100 per student is considered an exorbitant price.



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