

Reopening of German schools leads to explosion of COVID-19 infections

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On Thursday, the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) announced that 4,516 people in Germany had become infected with the coronavirus in the previous 24 hours. That is nearly 1,700 more than on Wednesday, which with 2,828 new infections had already marked the highest increase since April. The rate of positive tests (from 1.22 to 1.64 percent) as well as the average age—and thus the potential death rate of those infected—also rose sharply in the past week. According to the RKI, twice as many cases occurred last week as in the first week of September.

The ruling class knows that it is preparing a catastrophe with its ruthless policy of opening up the economy and its refusal to take serious measures to contain the virus. Social Democratic Party (SPD) health expert Karl Lauterbach declared that if the average age of those infected continued to converge with that of the population, a death rate of at least 1 percent could be expected—i.e., hundreds of deaths per day. This, however, assumes that the health system would not collapse.

At the end of September, Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) announced she expected 19,200 new infections daily until Christmas. This gloomy forecast has already been exceeded by the events of the past few days. If the trend continues, there is a risk of around 30,000 new infections per day by the end of the year. This would be in the order of magnitude of the United States—a country with a population four times larger.

In the United States, the Trump administration's callous response to the pandemic has so far claimed 212,000 lives, but with a far larger total number of infected people. The much-vaunted "low death toll" in Germany is almost identical to that of the US in relation to the number of infections. According to the figures of Johns Hopkins University in the US, the number of deaths in Germany would exceed 231,000, once the same number of people who had become infected there.

If, in the long term, as Merkel predicted in March, 60 to 70 percent of the German population were to become infected, this would mean between 1.53 and 1.78 million deaths at the

current mortality rate. This roughly corresponds to the warning in a paper prepared in April and published later by the Federal Interior Ministry, which assumes a "worst-case scenario" of "over 1 million deaths in 2020" in Germany alone.

The sharp rise in the number of infections is the result of the criminal and deliberate policy of the federal and state governments allowing the virus to spread. In recent weeks and months, they have done everything in their power to force workers back into factories, opening schools under unsafe conditions, covering up outbreaks and at the same time refusing to invest in protection against the pandemic.

According to the teachers' initiative #Bildungabersicher (#Educationbutsafe), there have been cases of infection in more than 1,000 schools and day-care centres in Germany so far. According to a recent official study from Britain, schools and educational institutions now account for almost half of the incidences of infection.

At a press conference on Thursday, called because of the exploding number of cases, Health Minister Jens Spahn (CDU) described the situation at kindergartens and schools as "comparatively good." Spahn demanded that a "second lockdown" should not be the subject of a media "debate." He said that the blame for the new infections was not the policy of the federal and state governments in reopening the economy, but private "celebrations," "weddings" and "religious gatherings."

Spahn deliberately blames the general population to conceal what is actually driving the pandemic: The explosion of case numbers in Germany and other countries is a direct result of the insecure return to workplaces and schools and is closely linked to the capitalist exploitation of the working class. This has been particularly acute since the beginning of the pandemic in the factories of meat-processing billionaire Clemens Tönnies.

For example, 112 of the 2,000 workers at the Tönnies processing plant in Weidemark in Sögel, Emsland, have already been infected, while production continues. Instead of ordering a comprehensive quarantine and mobilising teams

of doctors, the responsible district authority declared on Wednesday that workers in the slaughterhouse must continue working until Friday—those in the cutting plant even until Sunday. This is to be done “so that no goods are spoiled.” The municipal schools are also to remain open as usual.

Meanwhile, the Tönnies subsidiary announced it would apply for an injunction against the closure to “maintain proportionality” in the balance between profit and human life. Furthermore, the company stated that the slaughtering of currently 8,000 pigs per day—instead of the previous 15,000—represented an unacceptable “pressure on agricultural production chains” and endangered “animal welfare on farms in the region.”

In a Vion meat processing facility in Emstek (Lower Saxony), where 63 employees have been infected so far, work is also continuing. The Cloppenburg district administration has agreed to this with the company, reported broadcaster NDR. In nearby Vechta, two residents of a nursing home where 50 coronavirus cases occurred last week also died.

This “profits before life” policy is accompanied by a right-wing propaganda campaign by business, politics and the media, which plays down the virus. In an interview with Wolfram Weimer—the former editor-in-chief of *Die Welt* and the *Berliner Morgenpost*, as well as the founder of the right-wing magazine *Cicero* — the Bonn virologist and advocate of “herd immunity” Hendrik Streeck complains that the population is “too afraid” of a virus that is “deadly only to a few,” After all, the risk posed by the virus is “now well calculable,” he said.

Weimer and Streeck met on the fringes of the Hamburg economic summit “New Thinking,” which was also attended by former SPD Chairman and Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel, billionaire Erich Sixt, former EU Commissioner Günther Oettinger and the president of the CDU Economic Council Astrid Hamker. Streeck and Weimer agreed that the danger of a global pandemic should “not be overdramatised.”

This is also the line of the Left Party. “The virus and the disease are dangerous, but our health system is now able to deal with COVID-19,” said Thuringia’s state Premier Bodo Ramelow yesterday in an interview with *Neues Deutschland*. “I ask that we panic less.”

In Thuringia, which is governed by the Left Party, the SPD and the Greens, there was recently an outbreak of COVID-19 in a home for the disabled, during which 23 people—15 residents and eight employees—became infected. According to a report by broadcaster MDR, the people affected are currently in quarantine. After the Kassenärztliche Vereinigung (Association of Statutory

Health Insurance Physicians) had explicitly refused to allow several residents who showed symptoms to undergo a test, one of the accusations is that they failed to provide assistance.

Ramelow described the district as a “hotspot” but immediately made clear that even a local lockdown in a risk area was out of the question for his administration. He explained to *Neues Deutschland* that the contacts of those affected were currently being monitored “so that we do not have to shut down the entire district.”

In the meantime, according to the Robert Koch Institute, the cities and districts of Bremen, Esslingen, Offenbach and Frankfurt am Main, Hagen, Hamm, Remscheid, Vechta and the whole of Berlin are considered risk areas. On Wednesday afternoon, a majority of the federal states agreed on a ban on commercial accommodation for holidaymakers from domestic risk areas. Ramelow rejected the measure, declaring that one cannot lock oneself up from the virus.

There was sufficient capacity in his state that all those in Thuringia could get a test before undertaking a journey—however, there would be no free coronavirus tests for workers. He only wanted to “point out that people have to pay for it themselves. And that means: Those who have less money may not be able to afford it for their families. ... A pensioner who wants to visit her grandson may not be able to afford it.”

Ramelow’s remarks confirm the warnings of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) that the murderous policy of systematically allowing the virus to infect the population is being pursued equally by all parties in the Bundestag (federal parliament).

Workers and youth must draw the necessary conclusions. They must organise themselves into independent action committees and prepare a general strike to save the lives of hundreds of thousands. In this struggle, they face not only federal and state governments and their allied trade unions, but the entire capitalist system.



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