Right-wing propagandists in Germany promote “herd immunity”

Gregor Link
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In the past several days, the Robert Koch Institute (RKI)—the German federal government agency and research institute responsible for disease control and prevention—has reported unprecedented numbers of new infections in Germany: 14,964 on Wednesday, 16,774 on Thursday, 18,681 on Friday and finally 19,059 new infections on Saturday. In other words, more than one in seven of the 500,000 or so people who have been diagnosed as infected in Germany so far were infected last week.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has repeatedly pointed out, the governments of Europe are pursuing a policy of systematic infestation that endangers the lives of millions of people. On Wednesday, Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) announced a “package of measures” due to come into force Monday.

The package is fully geared to guaranteeing the profits and interests of the super-rich and big business. It rules out a life-saving shutdown of industry. Workers will continue to be sent to work and students to school in the midst of the pandemic.

This murderous and politically criminal policy is accompanied by a reactionary propaganda campaign in politics and the media.

This was most clearly summed up on Thursday by the leader of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) parliamentary group, Alexander Gauland, whose extreme right-wing party is once again being brought into position, as it was at the time of the “refugee crisis,” to pave the way for a common right-wing policy agreed to by all parties. In his speech before the German Bundestag (federal parliament), Gauland warned against “a second lockdown of the economy” and declared: “This price is too high... We must weigh up the costs, also at the price of people dying.”

Business daily *Handelsblatt* published a similar comment. Under the headline, “The virus is manageable without the lockdown—Lockdown 2.0 is a mistake,” author Thomas Tuma rages against the “hysteria,” the “panic mongering,” the “doomsday scenario” and the “deafening cacophony” of media coverage in regard to the coronavirus. Tuma is a jury member of the Axel Springer Journalism Prize and deputy editor-in-chief of *Handelsblatt*, where he also oversees the publication of a supplement on “fashion and lifestyle topics.”

Tuma pleads for medical experts, media and “parts of the government” to “engage in a kind of voluntary coronavirus silence” in the interest of German business—in other words, to practice self-censorship and cover-ups under the conditions of an exponential spread of the pandemic throughout Europe. Such a disinformation campaign, which would undoubtedly be at the expense of countless additional lives, would be “comparatively harmless” and would “not even cost much,” according to Tuma.

News about the “new infections and cumulative sickness figures published by the Robert Koch Institute, which, as is long known, say nothing,” the author calls “half-truths” and “fake news.” Politicians who raised any warnings were “horsemen of the apocalypse” who should be sent on “vacation.” After all, there were already warnings “not to exaggerate things with our fight against the pandemic.”

In his thundering “commentary,” the *Handelsblatt* editor explicitly refers to the so-called “Great Barrington Declaration”—a document that underpins the strategy of the Trump government and has been described by the WSWS as a “manifesto of death.”

In addition, Tuma cites a joint position paper by the National Association of Statutory Health Insurance Physicians (KBV) and professor of virology Hendrik Streeck (University of Bonn) and Jonas Schmidt-Chanasit (University of Hamburg), which demands that a renewed “lockdown” should not be the “reflex consequence” to the growth in infection rates. The current strategy of “containment through contact tracing” should have less priority in the future.

In words that could come from AfD party headquarters, the paper says, “The decline in case numbers is an urgent political task, but not at any price.” The virus “will accompany us in the coming years.” What is needed is a coexistence “in the greatest possible freedom,” which is based on “personal responsibility instead of paternalism,” since the latter “does not correspond to our understanding of a free democratic basic order.”

By “freedom,” these gentlemen understand a kind of Social Darwinism, i.e., the sacrifice of innumerable human lives in order to slow down “the decline of entire branches of the economy.”

Streeck, Schmidt-Chanasit and KBV chairman Andreas Gassen have long been the “medical” spokesmen for a brutal policy of loosening all safety measures, which amounts to the systematic infection of the population. Gassen told the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* that “a blanket lockdown” would “reduce the number of infections in the short term,” but that it would “be neither target-oriented nor proportionate.” He recommended that members of the so-called “risk group” should “reconsider” their “contact behaviour” individually—everyone should “decide for themselves what risk they want to take.”

HIV virologist Streeck is systematically promoted and built up

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by large parts of the media and political establishment. In addition to appearing on talk shows and in various tabloid papers, news weekly *Der Spiegel* recently devoted a comprehensive and "personal" cover story to him under the title, "The Anti-Hero." It makes it clear, once again, that the former US Army immunologist is well networked with politics and the media—including Free Democratic Party (FDP) leader Christian Lindner, PR strategist Michael Mronz, North Rhine-Westphalia state Premier Armin Laschet and the billion-dollar slaughterhouse operator Clemens Tönnies.

Streeck had already hit the headlines in April because he had the unfinished "Heinsberg Study," which trivialized the dangers of the pandemic, published by an exclusive PR agency. At that time, according to *Der Spiegel*, he had been advised "from quite high up in the federal government to withdraw from the public coronavirus debate."

Streeck quite openly advocates the pseudo-scientific policy of so-called "herd immunity," which is rejected by leading virologists and epidemiologists. He told the *Frankfurter Rundschau* on Wednesday, "I think it is possible that by the end of next year we will be at a point where the pandemic will be ended by the virus itself... That so many people will have become infected that the chains of infection will break off again and again by themselves in many places."

In the same interview, Streeck made clear that life-saving investments in public health and care systems running into billions were not an option for him, nor for the German government. "We have limited resources."

The same line is taken by the Hamburg virologist Schmidt-Chanasit. Due to the allegedly unalterable fact that "capacity is simply lacking," "it is necessary to refrain from making any contact with young people," he told NDR radio on Monday. At the same time, the Hamburg-based tropical medicine specialist called on politicians to create "free space" for larger parties—although a recent YouGov youth study showed that the overwhelming majority of young people consider the protective measures currently in force to be "appropriate" or "insufficient."

In an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Schmidt-Chanasit added that adherence to hygiene rules and the use of the federal government's coronavirus warning app were "perfectly sufficient to survive the pandemic well."

The paper by Gassen, Schmidt-Chanasit and Streeck bears the lofty subtitle, "The Common Position of Science and the Medical Profession." This is a deliberate deception. Although it is supported by numerous doctors' associations, these are not scientific institutions, but professional bodies primarily concerned with the material interests of doctors.

Numerous physicians have meanwhile distanced themselves from the paper. The Professional Association of German Anaesthetists (BDA), whose name is on the list of supporters, has protested against it. They had been named as signatories without consultation. BDA President Götz Geldner told the press that he "did not support the content of the position paper" and "had no advance knowledge of the paper."

This view is also shared by the German Society for Anaesthesiology and Intensive Care Medicine, with more than 15,000 members. The president of the German Interdisciplinary Association for Intensive Care and Emergency Medicine (DIVI), Uwe Janssens, said he "had no sympathy for accusations of panic." At the beginning of the week, Janssens had issued an urgent warning of an impending catastrophic overload of intensive care units in Germany.

The scientific research bodies unanimously reject the policy of herd immunity proposed by Streeck, Gassen and Schmidt-Chanasit. In a joint paper entitled, "It is serious," they demand: "The number of cases must be reduced before bed occupancy in hospitals becomes critical." To prevent a "sharp rise in the death rate," contact had to be systematically reduced by three-quarters. "This is the only way to interrupt the chains of infection and contain the situation again."

The paper goes on to say, "Every infected contact that escapes the health authorities is the origin of a new chain of infection that then escapes control... Overloading the health authorities can therefore lead to an ever increasing number of unreported cases and ultimately to an uncontrolled exponential growth in the number of cases. The health authorities are already overloaded in many circles."

The signatories—the German Research Foundation, Helmholtz Association, Max Planck Society, Leibniz Society, Fraunhofer Society and Leopoldina—predict a daily case number of more than 100,000 new infections by the end of November if no measures are taken to restrict contact.

According to scientific studies, the original lockdown measures in the spring, which were imposed by governments under the pressure of spontaneous strikes and overwhelming public pressure, saved a total of 3.1 million lives in eleven European countries.

A week ago, Germany's leading virologists had already vehemently opposed the policy of herd immunity: "We note with concern that the voices are once again growing louder in favour of natural herd immunity as a strategy for combating the pandemic," warned the German Society of Virology (GfV).

It firmly rejects this strategy, which "would lead to an escalating increase in the number of fatalities." It justified this by saying that "even with the strict isolation of pensioners, there are still other risk groups that are far too numerous, too heterogeneous and in some cases unrecognized to be actively shielded."

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