

Strikes and protests across Germany against regular school operations

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The incidence of infections in German schools has long since run out of control. Often, dozens of students and teachers are infected at a single school. But the federal and state governments have made clear that they want to keep schools fully open at all costs and are systematically covering up coronavirus cases. Under these conditions, students throughout Germany are beginning to take the protection of their health and their families into their own hands.

After student strikes in Greece and Poland and strikes by teachers in France, students in Germany are also organizing school strikes and protests in more and more cities. They are no longer prepared to be sacrificed for a policy that puts the profit interests of billion-dollar corporations before the most basic needs of the population.

Last Monday, students at the Hugo-Kükelhaus-Berufskolleg (HKBK) in Essen went on an “indefinite strike,” calling for hybrid teaching, i.e., a mixture of classroom and distance learning in which classes are divided up and taught in rotation. The WSWS has reported on this.

“We are afraid,” the HKBK student council wrote in a statement on the strike. “Fear of infecting grandma and grandpa. Fear of infecting ourselves. Fear of losing people who mean a lot to us.” While “outside of schools [safety] measures were being intensified,” they continued to sit “day after day, for hours together in close quarters.” The Essen students appealed to their classmates at all “secondary and vocational schools in the country to do the same as us!”

The WSWS spoke with Luisa Maria Cagnazzo, the HKBK student spokesperson, who reported many confirmed cases at the school. She said she had had personal contact with one person. “If classes continued to run as they have, I think it is inevitable that you become infected,” says Luisa. “Classes have divided themselves independently into A and B groups according to individual class size. They are now alternating between distance and in-person classes to halve the number of contacts.”

Luisa reports that students are being put “under enormous pressure” by the authorities, the Education Ministry and the

government, and explains, “Many are afraid of getting a six [bad mark] if they go on strike. I don’t think that’s right. It’s not acceptable that our education system punishes students for taking responsibility for the health of their fellow human beings.”

Regarding the reasons why students are being put at risk and under pressure, Luisa said, “Schools are to remain open to maintain regular operations and thus the economy.” The strike is intended to show “that the health of students, teachers and their families is more important. In our opinion, the whole class should be quarantined in case of infection.” Several student councils “who want to join our struggle” had contacted them.

Students have also organized protests at the Gauß-Gymnasium in Worms after coronavirus cases were confirmed there, most recently in the upper school. Like the HKBK students in Essen, they are also demanding hybrid classes with divided learning groups, so-called A/B weeks. “We sit cheek to cheek next to each other and have no distance between us at all,” says Can, a student at the high school, in an interview with broadcaster SWR. His classmate Sarah adds, “I think that conditions at the moment simply don’t work at all. The measures are simply impossible.”

Not even the immediate neighbouring classmates of infected students are quarantined, reports student representative Emanuel Bauer. Nor had they been tested. “And the direct neighbours are still sitting here in the school,” explains Emanuel. The state government of Social Democrats (SPD), Free Democrats (FDP) and the Greens and the SPD-led state Education Ministry in Rhineland-Palatinate insist that classes remain full and that all pupils attend. Questioned by broadcaster SWR, the health authority did not want to comment and merely let it be known that everything was “following the rules.”

In Hesse, where the state government is particularly notorious for its herd immunity policy, pupils have founded the unverantwortlich.org (irresponsible.org) initiative. They collect photo statements on their Instagram account from students protesting against the life-threatening regular

operations and the inaction of the federal and state governments. The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke about this with Altay, a founding member of the initiative, who is in 12th grade in Hesse.

Altay, too, is demanding that the coronavirus measures recommended by the public health body Robert Koch Institute (RKI), which envisage halving class sizes when there are more than 50 cases, be adhered to. “Also, we are demanding that education provision is ensured for all pupils and that air filters are installed throughout the school,” he explains. “Although there have already been several cases of infection at our school, the RKI’s measures have so far hardly been implemented at all. In other respects, too, the only things that are being done are merely symbolic. In Hesse, just enough money has been made available to install two air filter systems at each school.”

Altay impressively describes the effects of the criminal policies being pursued by the federal and state governments against students, teachers and parents. “When I go to school in the morning, I feel as if I am going to a state-ordered ‘coronavirus party.’ The corridors and refectories are still full. Despite the cold, ventilation continues to be provided regularly, of course. When I wrote a paper today, I was so cold that I had to keep pressing my hands in my lap to continue writing.”

The founders of *unverantwortlich.org* were pleasantly surprised by the good response to their initiative. “Our demands are essentially common sense among students and teachers. The student body has overwhelmingly supported our demands, and we have also received broad support from the public. Many people have contacted us and thanked us personally, including parents.”

The students are also supported by teachers from Hesse. “We can’t go on like this, the risk of getting infected and the psychological burden for all involved is too great,” Wolfgang Kuhn, a teacher at the vocational Martin Luther King School, explained to the *Hessische-Niedersächsische Allgemeine*.

Many other comments by teachers on social media make clear that the education minister’s supposed concern for “child welfare” and educational inequality has nothing to do with reality. On the contrary, decades of austerity policies in education—enforced by all parties in the Bundestag (federal parliament)—have created the current situation. The policy of the Hesse Ministry of Culture (responsible for education) had “dumbfounded” him, Kuhn said.

Given the mass protests by pupils and teachers in Greece, Poland and France, Altay said, *unverantwortlich.org* declared “our solidarity with all our fellow pupils on this earth who are fighting for their rights and their health.”

To link these struggles together, students must build rank-

and-file committees for safe education. All the establishment parties—from the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) to the Left Party—are pushing the herd immunity policy using a mixture of political and administrative coercion and cover-ups. The rank-and-file committees must therefore be completely independent of these parties and the trade unions, which sometimes “critically” support this policy but are more often in the front lines of helping to implement it.

Tamino, a founding member of a network of action committees in Karlsruhe, says concerning the ongoing herd immunity policy advocated by all parties, “This shows, I think, simply once again that capitalism is not ethical and in no way a system of the many, of the masses, but only a system of the 1 percent, which even allows massive dying among the masses for the benefit of the 1 percent. Thus, it is neither moral nor democratic.”

Berdan, who goes to a vocational school in Dortmund not far from the HKBK, and who co-founded an action committee there in August, explains, “That is the essence of capitalism. It did not surprise me that the ruling classes put human lives at risk. This happened too often in the past.”

Given the rapid spread of the virus in classes and school buildings, students must not lose any time. They must expand the strikes and understand that they are ultimately in conflict with capitalism, which is willing to sacrifice the health and lives of ordinary students, teachers and parents for the interests of the economic and financial elites. Only anti-capitalist, i.e., socialist, conclusions can be drawn from this insight.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) advocates a socialist and international strategy for a Europe an-wide school strike. To counter the herd immunity policy of the ruling elites and to end the humanitarian catastrophe that is developing in all countries of Europe and the world, rank-and-file committees of students, teachers and parents must be set up to prepare a general strike.

Register today to participate in existing rank-and-file committees or to create new ones.



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