

Growing protests in Germany against lethal policy of opening schools

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The decision by German politicians to keep schools, day-care centres and businesses open under unsafe conditions is daily costing the lives of hundreds of people, who die a completely avoidable and agonizing death. On Wednesday, the number of deaths in Germany reached a new high of 512 deaths—the day before it was 487. Another 17,000 to 19,000 people are currently infected every day, and many fall seriously ill.

Nevertheless, the federal and state governments are sticking to their homicidal herd immunity policies, and on Wednesday, again spoke out against the closure of schools and nonessential production. In doing so, they are continuing deadly policies and putting tens of thousands of lives at risk. The positive test rate has risen sharply in recent weeks and now stands at 9.3 percent—almost twice as high as the threshold of 5 percent set by the World Health Organisation (WHO), a level above which the pandemic threatens to spiral out of control.

“We can see that the health authorities are increasingly exhausted,” said Professor Lothar Wieler, president of the Robert Koch Institute (RKI—the German government agency responsible for disease control and prevention), at a press conference on Wednesday. “For example, they are no longer able to determine where those affected have contracted the disease. We are seeing more and more outbreaks in old people’s homes and nursing homes.” In some regions, Wieler said, hospitals were once again at the limit of their capacity. The number of serious outbreaks and deaths was increasing “from week to week.” Due to the time lag between infection and death, “many more” were to be expected.

Virologist Christian Drosten, from Berlin’s Charité hospital, also confirmed on Twitter on Wednesday, concerning the figures in the RKI report, that these were “minimum measures” due to “under-testing” and that “late reports could therefore be expected.”

The fact that November was by far the deadliest month of the pandemic to date is a devastating indictment of the criminally inadequate government action aimed solely at protecting the corporate balance sheets of German corporations, stabilizing the financial markets and not endangering Christmas shopping.

A key role in this calculation is played by schools and day-care centres—not as safe places for education and free development, but as “custodians” of children who should not get in the way of their working and profit-producing parents.

With a view to schools, Wieler conceded that “naturally” an “infectious event” was also taking place there and added, “We are

seeing more and more outbreaks in school settings. By [Wednesday] we had received news of a total of 636 outbreaks in schools. In the last four weeks, that was 64 outbreaks per week.”

To protect “grandma and grandpa,” the RKI president called for the coronavirus rules (wearing a mask, maintaining a safe social distance, regular ventilation) to be followed and warned the population of the devastating consequences of poor “compliance.” He did not mention a word about the government’s responsibility.

But students, parents and teachers know only too well that individual adherence to the rules is not enough to ensure safety from the contagious virus in crowded schools and day-care centres. While children and young people come to school with sleeping bags, hot-water bottles and umbrellas to avoid freezing or being snowed on due to the open windows and sub-zero temperatures, protests and school strikes for safe education are growing throughout the country.

As reported by broadcaster WDR, students at the Schiller School in Bochum went on strike on Wednesday against forced attendance at classes amid the pandemic, “to protect their own health and that of their families.” According to the school management, half of the students stayed away from lessons, and in the upper school, “a maximum of five percent” of students were present. Student representative Abdelbari Shniba told the broadcaster, “The anger about the current coronavirus schools’ policy is, of course, great. This is mainly because it is the top priority of this state government to enforce in-person lessons by all means.” He emphasized “that we are not per se striking lessons, but in-person lessons.”

According to press reports, the district government of Arnsberg, in its role as school supervisory authority, made it clear in an “objective discussion” with the students “that there is no room for exceptions from the nationwide regulations.” School administrators could only set up distance learning “in consultation with the responsible school supervisory authority” if in-person teaching could no longer be guaranteed “due to a lack of personnel capacities caused by the coronavirus”—in other words, only if masses of teachers had already become victims of the pandemic.

In Frankfurt, hundreds of students went on strike on Monday to demand safe education and a model alternating in-person with at-home lessons. Three hundred students took part in a demonstration at 11 a.m., called by the Frankfurt am Main City School Board (SSR). As the *hessenschau* television news reported, the students were demanding the provision of additional buses and trains for

peak hours and a tightening of hygiene rules in schools. “Regular lessons in full classrooms are a danger to students, teachers and their families,” explained SSR board member Hannes Kaulfersch.

The school strikes in Bochum, Frankfurt and other cities follow the pattern of protests and school occupations that have taken place in France, Poland and Greece in recent weeks and months. They are part of a nascent international mass movement of students and workers against the European governments’ herd immunity and austerity policies.

Resistance is also growing among teachers. In a video statement on Instagram that went viral, teacher and author Bob Blume states, “Actually, you don’t even need to read Kafka anymore—you just have to look into the latest regulations.” This was particularly evident in the refusal of state governments to close schools or equip them safely: “If the incidence value is too high for us, we simply set the limit higher!” He had “to bring forward all class tests,” so that “students now have to write three class tests a week” and were literally “bombarded” with tests.

Meanwhile, he said, there was a lack of “resources for school administrators, who sit in school until the evening.” While he publicly condemned the situation, Blume said, “no one among the politicians was interested.” He summed up their attitude toward the pandemic and schools by saying: “Students simply don’t matter. Teachers don’t matter, school administrators don’t matter—it all simply doesn’t matter at all.”

Andrei Priboschek, editor of the educational magazine *News4Teachers*, has also sharply criticized the arrogance and inaction of government politicians in an open letter to the prime ministers of the German states.

Given the hypocritical admission by Bavarian State Premier Markus Söder that “practically one plane crashes every day in Germany,” Priboschek said, “the question arises as to why you don’t care about air traffic control (to keep the analogy). On the contrary: you do everything possible to maintain mass air transport without restrictions. Worse still: you even drive people into the aeroplanes.”

Instead of ensuring safety in schools or closing them down, government politicians had agreed “that schools could introduce hybrid in-person and at home teaching, if the local incidence value is over 200—but even then, only occasionally and when it suits the respective state government.” And this despite the “hundreds of outbreaks in educational institutions” noted by the RKI.

The result of this decision was that “aeroplanes ... continue to fall from the sky day after day, while in day-care groups and school classes, around 13 million children, young people and their educators and teachers are brought together every day practically unprotected, in the case of schools this is even obligatory due to compulsory education.”

The *News4Teachers* editor also contradicts the lie that keeping schools open has something to do with educational fairness: “For decades ... we have known that 20 percent of students—those from poor families—are well and truly disconnected. ... And what have you done for these children in the past 20 years? Nothing.” There were “no cross-cutting school concepts” for distance learning, no adapted curricula and examination schedules, “no digital equipment” and no additional teaching staff to ensure that students

could repeat the “messed up school year” voluntarily.

Instead, “millions of children and hundreds of thousands of teachers have to sit in schools every day at single-digit temperatures in conditions that you and your staff in state chancelleries and ministries would never accept. The federal government provides its top officials on business trips with a second ticket for air and rail travel, so they don’t have anyone sitting next to them during the flight or trip. State administrations have equipped state parliaments and ministries with mobile air filters. They conduct their meetings via video conferencing software and sit behind Plexiglas screens in the state parliaments. But day-care centres and schools must continue as if there were no pandemic.”

Their “dishonesty towards families, educators and teachers,” Priboschek concludes, meant the German state premiers were “not one jot better” than the US president and notorious liar, Donald Trump, whose government is responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands.

To stop the murderous “profits before life” policy, students, teachers, educators and parents need a socialist perspective, and must take their safety in their own hands. An important step on this path was marked by a networking meeting last Friday, called by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE). By an overwhelming majority, the meeting adopted a political resolution calling for the formation of rank-and-file committees to prepare strikes for safe education.

The resolution stresses that “resistance in schools must be linked to workers’ struggles for safe workplaces and to defend jobs. It must be part of a broad mobilization for a general strike that places the needs and health of the people against the profit logic of capitalism.” Instead of transferring billions to the corporations, the following demands must be implemented: Close schools and day-care centres and prepare safe education! Invest billions in safe and good education! Full compensation for lost wages for parents who have to care for their children!



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