

New coronavirus hotspots at German meatpacking plants and Amazon hubs

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The measures implemented by the Merkel government and the federal states to deal with the pandemic are doing nothing to stop the spread of Sars-CoV-2 but are sacrificing hundreds of lives every day unnecessarily for the profit interests of the corporations and banks. This is shown by the daily registered case numbers. Despite a high number of unreported cases, the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) reports extremely high new infection and rising death rates. On Friday, there were again almost 23,500 new infections and 432 deaths within 24 hours. On Saturday, 497 deaths were reported.

The government measures, which remain valid until January 10, except for Christmas, only affect private households. The federal and state governments are refraining from closing businesses, schools and day-care centres or restricting the use of public transportation. In doing so, they are counteracting the first commandment of any successful pandemic control: “Avoid all social contacts!”

“The virus spreads wherever people come together. The virus is always there,” Robert Koch Institute (RKI) President Lothar Wieler stated on Thursday. More than 18,000 people have died of COVID-19 in Germany so far. The deadly course of events particularly affects older people.

Many younger people also face severe symptoms and die of Sars-CoV-2. Twenty-nine-year-old rapper Brittanya Karma died of the virus in Hamburg on December 1. According to official RKI data, at least 12 teachers and educators, 27 nurses in hospitals and 55 others in old people’s homes, nursing homes and mass accommodation have succumbed to the cruel lung disease so far.

In a new study, intensive care physicians have found that during the first wave, about 20 percent of

COVID-19 patients treated in hospital died. Of those who were admitted to an intensive care unit (ICU), one in two died. These alarming results, which were obtained from the data of around 10,000 patients, were presented to the public on Wednesday by Prof. Christian Karagiannidis of the German Interdisciplinary Association for Intensive and Emergency Medicine (DIVI).

Among those reportedly currently struggling for their lives in an ICU are at least five Amazon employees. Hundreds of them are ill. This was revealed by local works council representatives belonging to the Verdi union in the logistics centres in Graben (Bavaria) and Koblenz (Rhineland-Palatinate). The focus of the pandemic is thus on the working class, which confronts the worst conditions, earns the least and is most at risk from COVID-19.

Verdi reported via a Tweet on November 26, “At the Graben site near Augsburg, around 300 of the 1,800 employees in total are currently ill with COVID-19. Of the ver.di members among those infected, five are in intensive care.” Amazon in Koblenz also saw dozens of new COVID-19 cases in November. For this reason, the company cancelled the entire night shift in Koblenz for two weeks until November 26; around 400 employees were quarantined.

According to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, the number of 300 infected people in Graben can be traced back to the Augsburg trade union secretary, Sylwia Lech, who evaluated statements from employees. This was contradicted by an official Amazon spokesperson and a representative of the Augsburg health department. According to them, “only” about 30 infected persons are known from the Amazon site in Graben.

As Lech explained, however, the Amazon workers come from a huge catchment area that extends beyond

the district to Munich and Kaufbeuren. The health department in Augsburg was never aware of all cases. In any event, the numbers are alarming, and show that Amazon has so far covered up and played down serious outbreaks.

The billion-dollar company has decided not to systematically test and protect all its employees and, if need be, will carry on operations at any cost to life. This is especially the case now, when it is important not to endanger its profitable Christmas trade. Even before the pandemic, Amazon founder and CEO Jeff Bezos was the richest man in the world. In the months when COVID-19 has raged he was able to increase his fortune to over \$200 billion.

At the same time, 20,000 Amazon workers in the United States alone have become infected with the coronavirus. There have also been outbreaks in European branches in Spain, France, Italy, Poland and Germany, but Amazon is doing its best to cover these up.

The health authorities in the districts where the logistics centres are located see no need for action and hardly exercise any control over the company, which apparently does not provide precise figures that are updated daily. Yet Amazon is known for the most precise and comprehensive monitoring practices when it comes to scrutinizing the work of its employees.

Verdi is not lifting a finger to ensure better protection from the pandemic. The services union fully supports the herd immunity policy of the federal and state governments, in which many ministers with Verdi membership sit. The union plays a key role in sabotaging any resistance to this policy in schools and other public enterprises and institutions. It is pursuing the same policy at Amazon.

On its various websites, Verdi instructs even high-risk patients among its members that they must go to work at the risk of their lives. Under the headline, “Coronavirus: What employees need to know,” it says, “Injuring oneself or contracting an illness are part of the general risks of life, whether at work or during leisure time. This also applies to employees with a pre-existing illness that does not make them incapable of working, but which means they are exposed to a higher risk of developing a more severe course of disease due to a coronavirus infection.”

There are also new coronavirus outbreaks in other

large companies. At the large Tönnies slaughterhouse in Weißenfels (Saxony-Anhalt), 172 workers tested positive for COVID-19 a few days ago. Production involving 2,200 workers is to continue, nevertheless. The company only promised to take the infected workers to special quarantine facilities and carry out further tests. In the summer, there were mass outbreaks at the main Tönnies plant in Rheda-Wiedenbrück (NRW), in which more than 2,000 people became infected. About 40 workers had to be hospitalized at that time, some of them requiring intensive care.

Nevertheless, nothing happened. Supported by government decisions, Tönnies and other meat packing companies are able to continue to produce at full capacity despite the explosive spread of Sars-CoV-2, and even carry out operations on Sundays.

“As COVID-19 surges in Europe, governments protect profits over lives” was the title of a WSWS article published on October 28, which stated, “The lockdowns proposed by European governments will not halt the pandemic or avert a disastrous loss of life.” This was already clearly demonstrated in November, the deadliest month of the coronavirus pandemic to date. In the last two weeks alone, there have been 72,000 avoidable deaths from coronavirus in Europe and more than 4,400 in Germany.

Therefore, the WSWS and the sections of the ICFI call for independent rank-and-file safety committees to be set up in companies, businesses, schools and day-care centres so workers can take the protection against the pandemic into their own hands. As the article quoted earlier states: “Imposing a genuine shelter-at-home policy to protect the population from the global pandemic requires an independent, international mobilization of the working class against the European governments.”



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