

Germany: Coronavirus outbreaks turn Berlin elderly care homes into death traps

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In the German capital, which is governed by a coalition of the Social Democrats (SPD), the Greens and the Left Party, more and more nursing homes are becoming death traps for the elderly and people in need of care. Numerous coronavirus outbreaks in Berlin care homes only came to light because relatives and journalists made them known. The nursing homes' management, as well as the senate and district administrations cover up the cases and give only reluctantly or no information at all.

According to the newspaper *Tagesspiegel*, which cites information from the Berlin Senate, at least 295 nursing homes have been affected by outbreaks since the start of the pandemic. Already from mid-November to early December, the number of infected nursing home residents in Berlin had doubled to 2,050. Now, at least 1,400 more have been added since the beginning of December. Since the start of the coronavirus crisis, more than 3,400 residents and more than 1,600 caregivers in Berlin homes have been infected with COVID-19. The WSWs reported on multiple outbreaks in the spring.

On December 15, Berlin reported a record 53 new COVID-19 deaths within one day. Yesterday, 39 people died, and 1,593 new infections were registered in Berlin. More than every second death takes place in a nursing home, according to the *Tagesspiegel*. Almost 500 care home residents have died from the virus so far. The total number of COVID-19 victims in Berlin has now reached 1,105 deaths.

On Tuesday alone, three deadly outbreaks in care homes came to light. In a care home in Mariendorf, southern Berlin, eight residents died of COVID-19 and 64 out of 79 elderly people and 22 out of 72 workers in the facility have been infected. In a care home in Wilmersdorf nine residents have died and more than 30 people are infected. Seven residents died after an outbreak in a care home in Biesdorf in the Eastern district of Marzahn-Hellersdorf, where the Left Party is responsible for the district health council and holds the position of district mayor since 2016.

In the private Goldenherz care home in the middle of Berlin's working-class district Wedding, the largest outbreak in the capital so far was reported on December 14, with more than 150 infections. Twenty-two residents and one 48-year-old employee had died from COVID-19. In fact, the outbreak had

already been registered by authorities in November but had not been made public. The *Tagesspiegel* reports that it only learned about it in the middle of December via an "insider" and that the home's management did not want to provide any information.

In the meantime, a nurse had contacted the *Tagesspiegel* to expose the disaster at the facility. She said, "No hygiene measures were enforced before the outbreak until November 20, and no other measures such as mandatory masks were consistently monitored by management. Employees worked without protective clothing or gloves and went on duty despite having a cold, by order of the home's management."

A nursing home in the northern Berlin district of Reinickendorf has also become a hotspot of the virus. At the Domicil retirement home on Techowpromenade, 80 residents and 30 staff members tested positive in the middle of December; 14 people succumbed to the virus.

COVID-19 has been spreading there since November 20, but the case has only now become public because a relative of a victim informed the *Tagesspiegel*. His previously healthy father-in-law had died of an infection in only ten days.

Conditions at the Domicil facility have facilitated a rapid spread of the virus. The home was understaffed, and workers had to move back and forth between floors. Residents in double rooms who tested positive were not separated from their room neighbors, which the home's management justified by referring to lack of space.

Showering had been stopped "because the water vapors including the viruses can penetrate the FFP2 masks," the *Tagesspiegel* quotes. The food was apparently reduced to ready meals with disposable dishes. Many dementia patients refused to eat and were completely emaciated.

The relative told the *Tagesspiegel*, "We are shocked that such conditions can exist in a country like Germany." The man, in tears, denounced the silence of the authorities. He said he was sure that the "number of unreported cases is much higher in the city."

A similar case occurred at the Rosenhof housing complex for elderly people in the southwestern district of Zehlendorf. Eleven people died of coronavirus there in October, which only became public after a reader contacted the *Tagesspiegel*.

The district councilor for health, Carolina Böhm (SPD),

justified the authorities' cover-up policy. It was about "protecting the facility" from press calls and distorted reporting, she claimed. Böhm did not give precise details about the current situation of nursing homes in her district, but admitted that there are cases every day, which is now part of the "sad everyday life."

The same argument was repeated by the health councilor in the district of Friedrichshain, Knut Mildner-Spindler from the Left Party. There, in the Haus an der Spree nursing home, more than 80 residents and employees are now infected. Coma patients already had to be transferred to the hospital because they had not enough staff to care for them. Nevertheless, Mildner-Spindler downplayed the situation as "not that dramatic." It was "all clear and under control," the Left Party politician told the *Tagesspiegel* newspaper two weeks ago. He also waved away the seriousness of the situation by declaring that the outbreaks were now part of everyday life.

What Berlin politicians refer to as "sad everyday life" is the result of their deliberate policies. The mantra of recent months that one must "learn to live with the virus" is now showing its cruel logic. The federal government and all state governments, whether under Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU), SPD, Greens, Left Party or the Liberals (FDP), have prevented a containment of the pandemic and thus dramatically accelerated the spread of the virus into vulnerable population groups. In Berlin, the SPD and the Left Party in particular have implemented social cuts for decades and pushed the drive for profits in the care homes.

Media reports about seniors who perish in care homes are unwanted because they throw a spotlight on the "new reality" enforced by the German ruling elite in the interests of profit: the premature death of grandparents and parents and the selection and "triage" of people who, from the point of view of the capitalist profit economy, no longer have any value and are a burden for the health care system.

For cost reasons, testing and hygiene measures are enforced only hesitantly or not at all. According to the *Berliner Zeitung*, the Berlin health administration justified the lack of a testing strategy by pointing out that the tests were "basically only a snapshot" and therefore "only conditionally suitable for protecting facilities against the entry of the virus by visitors."

According to official figures, around 62,600 tests were carried out in Berlin in the week December 7–13. This was about 16,000 fewer than six weeks before. The reason is said to be fluctuating laboratory capacities, although the Senate, referring to the "business secrets" of the private laboratories, does not reveal why this is the case. The fact is that in Berlin, in many suspected COVID-19 cases, no tests are carried out or those tested had to wait several days for their results.

At the same time, Berlin's hospitals are increasingly overstrained. The head of Charité, one of Europe's largest university hospitals, sounded the alarm in the beginning of December. Speaking in the news *Tagesthemen*, he said, "We will very soon be at the limit of what we can do."

Capacity in intensive care units is running short. According to the DIVI Intensive Care Register, which documents intensive care treatment capacities in Germany on a daily basis, Berlin has the lowest proportion of vacant intensive care beds in a nationwide comparison. On Wednesday, only 140 of a total of 1,134 ICU beds for adults were vacant.

As anger among the working class about the devastating crisis is growing, the political parties are trying to wash their hands of the matter and divert attention from their responsibility. SPD politician Ephraim Gothe, city health councilor in Berlin-Mitte, claimed to the *Tagesspiegel* that there was no capacity to reconstruct the individual cases in nursing homes and discuss them publicly. "This is not the time to ask the question of guilt," Gothe said.

In fact, the "question of guilt" is already posed and answered. The SPD-Left Party-Green Senate is responsible for this disaster and now continuing on the same course. The Berlin Senate's new pandemic ordinance of December 14 reveals that the supposedly "tough" nationwide lockdown, in place only until January 10, is woefully inadequate and, because of exceptions and loopholes, not even remotely aimed at bringing the pandemic under control.

Events with up to 100 people outdoors and up to 50 people indoors are still allowed. The alleged closure of kindergartens is lifted through the back door because parents can still put their children in "emergency care" if they have no other solution. Since there is no closure of the factories or relief for the parents, the daycare centers are automatically filled. "In these cases, the [Berlin] Senate Department for Youth trusts in the solution and action competence of facilities and parents," it said in a press release. In other words, the Senate shifts responsibility to the working class, which continues to be forced to choose between their health and their jobs.

Other educational institutions also allow face-to-face teaching formats despite "lockdown." At Berlin universities, "practical formats that cannot be carried out digitally as well as exams" may take place in person; the number of students "shall" not exceed 25. Tests and exams at schools will not be postponed in view of the health catastrophe but may be conducted in person; teachers and school staff must be on duty. Berlin's Education Senator Sandra Scheeres (SPD) has announced that there will be emergency care for younger children even during the Christmas vacations. From January 11, schools should then reopen completely and resume in-person teaching.



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