

Deadliest week in Germany since COVID-19 pandemic began

Gregor Link

23 December 2020

Last week was by far the worst in the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany, with officially 175,314 infections and over 4,300 deaths (against 3,050 the previous week). Across Europe, the death toll exceeded the catastrophic half-million mark on Tuesday. After reports of deadly mass outbreaks in old people's homes dominating the headlines in recent weeks, the "profits before lives" policy of recent months is now revealing its murderous consequences more and more clearly in hospitals.

According to the *Pforzheimer Zeitung*, a hospital in Tettnang on Lake Constance halted admissions on December 10 because the virus had been detected in 34 people. Three infected patients had to be taken to Friedrichshafen, 13 kilometres away, due to severe symptoms. In the meantime, 84 staff and 26 patients have been infected—only five of the remaining patients tested negative.

At the hospital in Wangen im Allgäu, which is currently treating 18 COVID-19 patients, 28 staff members—including eight doctors—are infected and in quarantine. In addition to COVID-19 cases, the clinic only treats emergencies and performs deliveries—although the virus is also particularly deadly for pregnant women. The hospital in Pfullendorf reports three infected staff members and has also imposed an admission ban.

Meanwhile, in Saxony, the shortage of intensive care beds for COVID-19 patients is "significantly larger than officially reported," broadcaster MDR reports. While the DIVI intensive care register shows 50 free intensive care beds for the districts of Bautzen, Dresden, Sächsische Schweiz Osterzgebirge, Görlitz and Meißen, according to the hospital control centre's bed lists there are only about 20 available—less than half. One reason for this, according to the Görlitz hospital, was "staff who are ill or in quarantine, which means that free beds cannot be occupied."

According to a report by dpa press agency, the high death toll means corpses must now be stored temporarily in Zittau in eastern Saxony. The dead are being warehoused "in the flood support base" and will only be brought to the crematorium "when they are released for cremation," the city of Zittau reported on Tuesday evening. In Hanau, Hesse, a refrigerated container for coronavirus corpses had already been put into operation last week at the city's main cemetery to store bodies from the completely overloaded hospitals.

In addition to the virus hotspots in Saxony, which have been overwhelmed by the pandemic, there are now districts in Bavaria, Thuringia and Brandenburg with 7-day incidences of between 500 and 680 cases per 100,000 inhabitants. In Bavaria, all intensive care beds are occupied in eight cities and districts.

Since the devastating lack of staff there is exacerbating the situation, in a "cry for help" to the population, the counties in the metropolitan

region of Nuremberg/Fürth/Erlangen are now looking for helpers to relieve the staff in hospitals. As reported by the *Münchner Merkur*, the "excess mortality due to coronavirus" in Bavaria was so great that "the population is shrinking for the first time in a long time." Depending on the region, the death figures are on average between 6 and 18 percent higher than 2016 to 2019, the paper said.

Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, a federal state with a low population density, which has not been at the centre of the pandemic so far, is also expecting the health system to collapse soon. As broadcaster NDR reports, five rehabilitation clinics there are currently being converted into relief facilities where patients with waning COVID-19 symptoms and other illnesses will be cared for.

At the weekend, the death of a 38-year-old teacher at a comprehensive school in Berlin's working-class Kreuzberg district triggered a wave of anger and bewilderment. Soydan A., who according to *Tagesspiegel* had previously been in perfect health, fought the fatal disease over 32 days, before he finally succumbed. He was one of the thousands of educators infected with the virus because of forced unsafe face-to-face teaching.

According to the official figures of the Berlin Ministry of Education, 370 staff members in general education schools in the capital are coronavirus-positive, as well as 988 pupils. Statistics from the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) show that three educators infected with COVID-19 died last week.

In North Rhine-Westphalia, calculations have shown that the seven-day incidence rate among teachers compared to the total population exploded in October and November: from 183 in calendar week 44 (NRW-wide average: 162) to 280 in week 45 (average: 175), to 368 in week 46 (average: 171) and finally 361 in week 47 (average: 159). According to these official figures from the state school authorities, teachers were more than twice as at-risk of infection in November than the general population.

Nevertheless, the full reopening of schools after the end of the Christmas holidays and the official "lockdown" on January 10 is already being intensively prepared behind the backs of the population. "Within the Conference of State Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs," there is "agreement" that "there is no substitute for personal contact between teacher and pupil," newsweekly *Der Spiegel* quotes Brandenburg's Minister of Education and Cultural Affairs Britta Ernst, who is to take over the chair of the conference from January. In particular, "the SPD-led states," according to the news magazine, want to "reopen their schools or have not closed them at all" from January 10.

This murderous policy meets with overwhelming rejection among the population. For example, a survey by broadcaster ARD's

Deutschland-Trends has again shown that 85 percent of eligible voters consider the current containment measures “adequate” or “not extensive enough.” Although one in two parents complain of “heavy burdens,” two-thirds of those surveyed support the closure of schools or the suspension of compulsory attendance.

In face of this massive opposition, education ministers and state governments are increasingly openly resorting to pseudo-scientific propaganda and lies in their efforts to justify the return to compulsory attendance as soon as possible. For example, at the end of November, Hamburg’s schools’ senator (state minister), Ties Rabe, announced, “together with the Standing Conference of the State Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (KMK), a new study” on the incidence of infections in schools, which was to be carried out “based on Hamburg’s school data.”

As the ARD magazine programme *Panorama* reported on Thursday, “the Hamburg school authority” should also “take care of the preparation” for the study. To this end, Rabe said, “all our Hamburg data has been processed”—but without any involvement of epidemiological or virological experts.

SPD politician Ties Rabe is known as a hardliner on the issue of school reopenings, whose authorities have systematically covered up coronavirus infections in schools since the very beginning. Based on his authority’s fudged figures, Rabe had recently presented the results of an internal “numerical analysis,” according to which 80 percent of infected pupils had “probably not been infected at school at all.”

“The fall from grace of German education policy in the pandemic began at the moment when scientific findings were denied, ignored or reinterpreted,” says education journalist Andrej Priboschek, editor of the online magazine News4Teachers, in an interview with the *World Socialist Web Site*. “The talk of non-infectious children is always fuelled by education ministers.”

Priboschek wrote an open letter to the state premiers a few weeks ago, in which he harshly condemned the policy of operating unsafe schools. “I also wrote this letter because, as a self-employed journalist and family man, I am directly affected by this policy myself. If I were to contract COVID-19 and become ill for a fortnight or even months, the consequences would be devastating.”

“Amid the pandemic, if educational equity is suddenly brought into the discussion,” Priboschek said, this was “gross hypocrisy—no one has cared about that in past decades. The fact that socially disadvantaged families are much more threatened by coronavirus because they live in cramped conditions and depend on using public transport is simply ignored. In effect, you’re sending these people into the fire—this is especially true of SPD-led state governments.”

“It must also be said that not much information is published on deaths in schools and day-care centres,” the News4Teachers editor said. What was also necessary in this context, was a “criticism of my colleagues in the media.” Apart from “us and you [WSWS], there is not a single media outlet that criticises the schools’ policy or even tries to systematically present the facts.”

In November, the Münster district administration distributed a “handout” to all schools, encouraging school administrators to cover up information about any outbreaks and to gloss over the risk of infection in schools. The letter states, among other things, “If possible, do not provide identifying information about suspected or infectious cases at all!” The public, according to the district authority, “doesn’t want to hear that you have doubts—but that your school is a safe place!”

Back in September, the Conference of Ministers of Education and

Cultural Affairs commissioned a “handout for all schools” from the Federal Environment Agency. It concluded that “regular ventilation” in winter had “an important influence on the reduction of the virus load” and that the “use of mobile air purification devices in school rooms” was, therefore “basically not necessary.” The then-KMK chairwoman Stefanie Hubig (SPD) subsequently used this so-called expert opinion to justify in-person teaching and to reject the installation of air filters in the face of protesting parents.

On Friday, leading scientists published a joint appeal in the medical journal *The Lancet* for “a pan-European commitment for rapid and sustained reduction in SARS-CoV-2 infections.” The authors include Viola Priesemann, Melanie Brinkmann, Sandra Ciesek and 17 other researchers from across Europe.

The paper, published in 12 languages, calls for “a target of no more than ten new COVID-19 cases per million people per day” for the entire continent. This corresponds to a seven-day incidence of seven cases per 100,000 inhabitants, or a maximum of 830 new infections per day in Germany. This was the only way to contain the spread of the virus in a sustained manner, the authors explain.

“The virus does not respect borders,” initiator Priesemann (Max Planck Institute for Dynamics and Self-Organisation Göttingen) justified the demand in a press release. “Not least to avoid a ping-pong effect [of case numbers],” “all European countries must reduce case numbers simultaneously and as quickly as possible.” This would require “radical interventions such as lockdowns.” It was not a matter of “discussing individual measures such as school closures or restrictions in the work environment, in the private sphere or public transport, but of implementing all measures,” says Priesemann.

More than 300 other scientists have signed the paper. The German signatories include Max Planck President Martin Stratmann, RKI President Lothar Wieler, virologists Sandra Ciesek and Christian Drosten, Michael Meyer-Hermann of the Helmholtz Centre for Infection Research, as well as Gerald Haug, president of the German National Academy, and the presidents of several research organisations.

The implementation of these measures requires the independent intervention of the working class based on an international socialist programme. The European governments have already sacrificed hundreds of thousands of lives in the interests of German and European capitalism and are willing to continue this course in the New Year. This must be prevented at all costs.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) and its sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International call on workers and youth to organise themselves in independent action committees and prepare strikes for the immediate closure of all non-essential factories and schools. Our demands are: Close schools and day-care centres and prepare safe education! Billions must be invested in safe and good education! Full compensation for parents who have to look after their children!



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact