

A young Berlin teacher dies from coronavirus: An indictment of the city's pandemic policy

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The death of a young teacher in Berlin following a COVID-19 infection confirms the criminal nature of the official policy of keeping open businesses and schools. The deaths of thousands have become a cruel fact of life while the profits of a super-rich financial oligarchy continue to mount.

These class interests are enforced by a political system stretching from the far right Alternative for Germany (AfD) to the Left Party, which all agree that maintaining production, securing supply chains, and pushing share markets to ever higher levels are a much more important priority than the health and lives of teachers, students, and the population at large. This conspiracy against the population also includes the trade unions, which are closely linked to the political parties and the state apparatus.

In Berlin, this development can be seen in all its clarity. The city's governing Senate, a coalition of the Social Democratic Party, the Left Party and the Greens (known as red-red-green) is directly responsible for the death of the teacher, Soydan A. For the past months, the Senate has enforced a merciless education and health policy that has resulted in the increasing contamination of broad sections of the population. Every initiative by students and teachers aimed at reducing the risk of infection and limiting classroom instruction has been prevented or reversed by the Senate and school authorities with the use of brutal bureaucratic measures.

Soydan A. taught at the Carl von Ossietzky School in the Kreuzberg district. He was only 38 years old, had his own family and was very popular with his students. He taught German, Turkish and ethics.

The authorities had known for some time that the situation at the school was critical. For a number of weeks up until mid-December, the coronavirus status level at the school was officially at the highest level, "red," and there are many indications that Soydan A. contracted the coronavirus at the school. By early November, several students had tested

positive, and at least one other teacher was infected with COVID-19. Soydan A. was quarantined on Nov. 10 and hospitalised five days later, where he succumbed to the virus on December 17.

Relatives, friends, students and colleagues of the teacher were stunned and grieving. Many expressed their anger at those politically responsible on social media. "This is not just sad. This is a scandal," one writes, adding, "Responsibility lies with those on high whose duty is the well-being of the population."

The official condolence message from Berlin's Education Senator Sandra Scheeres (SPD), in which she expresses her "dismay" at the death of Soydan A., is full of hypocrisy and cynicism. Scheeres writes: "The death of this dedicated teacher, held in high esteem by all, once again demonstrates how terrible this virus is."

False! Soydan A.'s death shows the terrible and inhuman nature of government policy. It highlights the criminal irresponsibility of the Senator for Education and the entire Senate.

In recent weeks, Scheeres has repeatedly spread the lie that "schools and day care centres are the safest places to break chains of infection." Infections would take place "outside the school."

In mid-November, when staff at a secondary school in Berlin-Wilmersdorf sought to switch to teaching in shifts and home schooling following a high rate of infection, Scheeres intervened with bureaucratic arrogance and banned the measure. Such arbitrary decisions would not be accepted, the minister stated categorically.

Responding to a letter sent by teachers and parents to the Ministry of Education, she wrote: "If each individual school were to decide how they handle the balancing of the teaching of pupils, the result would be considerable differences in the implementation of hybrid instruction." Four hours a day of in-school teaching means a reduction in regular education and should be avoided as long as possible,

the Senate administration maintained, citing the many classes already cancelled in the spring.

In fact, the real priority for the Senate is not to maintain classes and provide better educational opportunities, nor is it the health and well-being of pupils, teachers, other school staff or teaching assistants in day care centres. This is evident from the long-standing neglect of schools and huge loss of teaching time due to inadequate staffing. The priority for the Senate is maintaining production levels in offices and factories. Schools must remain open so that parents can work. Profit before lives, that is the political maxim at all levels.

The ever-increasing numbers of infections and the deaths of teachers and pupils are a direct result of this policy. In the interest of the economy and to keep businesses running, schools have been reopened under unsafe conditions. Now they must remain open at all costs.

Germany's Family Minister Franziska Giffey (SPD) is quite blunt about this and insists that daycare centres and schools will be the first to reopen after the current shutdown. "Nurseries and schools were quite rightly the last to be restricted," she told RedaktionsNetzwerk Deutschland. "And as the federal Minister for Family Affairs, I will continue to insist that they also be the first to reopen for normal operations as soon as the infection situation permits."

The Greens work from the same playbook. When Education Senator Scheeres came under heavy pressure following the death of Soydan A., the education policy spokeswoman of the Green parliamentary group in the Berlin Senate, Marianne Burkert-Eulitz, expressly jumped to her side: "Nobody considers this acceptable, including Ms. Scheeres." Like many others, she continued, the education administration was forced to consider various options, which included precisely the right to education.

When the Greens, or the Minister of Family Affairs, talk about children's rights and the right to education, then alarm bells should ring. In Germany, one of the richest countries in the world, more than 1.5 million children live in families receiving Hartz IV welfare benefits. Although more and more people are working, increasing numbers of families live in poverty.

The policy of the Left Party, the SPD and the Greens is supported by the trade unions and in particular the Education and Science trade union (GEW), which is closely linked to the Senate parties in terms of personnel and structure. The GEW supported the premature opening up of schools this summer and has since done all it can to keep them open—despite mass opposition from students and teachers.

When the federal and state governments, following mass pressure, decided to extend winter vacations, the GEW presented a five-point program for the reopening of schools

on Jan. 11. The GEW's demands fall far short of the recommendations of the health specialists at the Robert Koch Institute, which stipulate reducing class sizes for all schools when levels of COVID-19 infection exceed a certain maximum limit.

For its part, the GEW has called for classes in different shift to start for fifth graders upwards, i.e., for all those children old enough to allow their parents to go to work and thereby increase dividends for the rich. In the case of nurseries, the GEW plan does not envisage any attempt to reduce groups of young children. Not even high-risk groups are to be exempted from attendance, according to the union. Instead, they should merely receive "advice from company medical officers"!

Supported by the GEW, the Berlin Senate is forging ahead with its reactionary policy based on economic interests. On January 11, in-person schooling is due to resume in Berlin, and even during the Christmas vacations "emergency care" was on offer for pupils and day-care children. Under conditions where there has been no widespread closure of businesses and/or aid for parents, this automatically leads to attendance at day care centres, where no special safety precautions apply. Recommended air filters have still not been installed in classrooms due to the costs involved.

The tragic death of Soydan A. throws a harsh light on the inhuman policy of opening up schools and businesses. At the same time opposition to the reactionary policy of "profit before life" is growing. Pupils, teachers and parents are increasingly taking their lives and health into their own hands and organising opposition against the prevailing policy. The Socialist Equality Party (SGP) calls for the setting up of independent Action Committees for Safe Education to organize strikes against the Senate and unions in order to close schools and factories and ensure appropriate safety measures are taken at all facilities.



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