

New year begins with record COVID-19 deaths in Germany

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The new year began in Germany in an even more deadly fashion than the old one ended. Despite greatly reduced health authority capacity over the New Year holiday, the past seven days represented the worst week of the pandemic to date, with more than 4,500 deaths reported in Germany. On Tuesday, the Robert Koch Institute (RKI)—the government health agency—reported another 1,019 deaths and 21,237 infections within the previous hours.

The situation in large parts of Germany is characterised by overcrowded crematoria, hospitals on the brink of collapse and mass death. According to the DIVI register, 82 percent of all intensive care beds in Germany are currently occupied, about a quarter, or 6,000, with coronavirus patients. More than half of these must be ventilated.

Undertakers and crematoria report they can no longer keep up due to the large number of the dead. In Saxony in particular, additional storage capacity has already had to be created in several places, or the dead have been transported to crematoria far away where capacity is still available.

At the same time, reports are piling up about hospitals and care facilities on the verge of collapse; overworked nursing staff; doctors making decisions about who can receive life-saving treatment and who cannot; and hospitals that can only maintain their operations with the support of the *Bundeswehr* (Armed Forces).

The Vogtland region of Saxony leads the country in new infections, with an incidence value of 929—meaning 929 out of 100,000 inhabitants, or just under 1 percent, have been infected with the virus, setting aside the number of unreported cases—in the past seven days. Of the 13 districts and cities in Saxony as a whole, only two have an incidence value below 300; all others are far above that.

Large parts of Thuringia, northern Brandenburg and several districts in Bavaria also have similarly high numbers.

Tobias Wenzel, head of the undertakers' guild in Saxony, put the situation in a nutshell when speaking to broadcaster NTV shortly before Christmas: "We, the undertakers, are just emptying the old people's homes. That makes me sad and angry at the same time."

Wenzel also described how he and his colleagues are confronted with desperate and explosive political questions

from many relatives: "Why are the old people's homes not prepared for the second wave? Why are those politically responsible for this still in office?" Excellent questions, indeed.

The federal and state governments in Germany stood idly by in the autumn as the pandemic continued to gain ground. Even when the health authorities had already officially given up tracking due to being overloaded, no effective containment measures were taken. Schools, day-care centres and businesses remained fully open until shortly before Christmas.

Saxony, governed by a coalition of the Christian Democrats (CDU), Social Democrats (SPD) and Greens, only became the biggest coronavirus hotspot at the end of last year. Until the beginning of October, the daily number of new infections was always below 300, but since that time, the situation has worsened explosively.

At the end of October, new infections per day in Saxony rose above 1,000 for the first time. At the end of November, it was above 2,000, on December 7 above 3,000 and on December 14 above 4,000. Currently, in Saxony alone, with 4 million inhabitants, there are more than 3,300 COVID-19 patients in hospital, 600 in intensive care; the number of active cases is 32,300.

With a seven-day incidence of over 400, the rate in Saxony is more than twice as high as the German average. The mortality rate, with 3,383 deaths, also exceeds all other federal states, by two times, measured against the number of inhabitants. Due to the limited activity of general practitioners, laboratories, health offices and authorities during the Christmas holidays, the figures are probably much higher.

Hospitals are approaching their limits in terms of absorbing new patients. Four of the 13 counties in Saxony have fewer than 10 free intensive care beds, another five fewer than 20. Given this situation, further record numbers of deaths in January are inevitable.

However, there was and is an alternative to this catastrophe. The present situation is a direct consequence of the policies of all the establishment political parties. In Saxony, the CDU-SPD-Green coalition has been governing for a year. After the state had been largely spared during the first wave in the spring, the state executive has pursued an unspoken herd immunity policy, playing down the danger of the COVID-19 pathogen.

An important role in this was played by the “Brake pad” study, produced on behalf of the state government by Dresden Technical University, under the direction of Prof. Reinhard Berner. The study, discredited among teachers and educators, examined the blood samples of 2,000 pupils and teachers for the first time in May and then again during the autumn holidays.

The study was “absurd,” as the WSWs said at the time, because it cited results as evidence that schools or day-care centres were safe obtained under conditions where the pandemic had barely begun. In both periods, there were fewer than 100 new infections per day in the whole of Saxony (not per 100,000 inhabitants), i.e., only about one-hundredth of the daily infections since November.

The Dresden study did not remain an isolated case. Various federal states presented similar studies declaring schools and day-care centres to be safe. If necessary, study results to the contrary were falsified and covered up. Even then, however, the claim that there was no risk for children, and that they would even contain the pandemic, was incompatible with the findings of other scientific studies.

In the meantime, it is beyond doubt that keeping schools and day-care centres open contributes significantly to the spread of the pandemic. There are numerous documented cases of mass outbreaks at schools, as well as of teachers who presumably became infected and fell fatally ill while at work, like Soydan A. in Berlin.

Professor Berner also spoke out in favour of a herd immunity policy on several occasions. In April, he promoted allowing the virus to “slowly spread” within the child population, and in early September, he defended the governments’ relaxation of the containment measures in an interview with the *Sächsische Zeitung*: “We can’t prevent every infection.”

The Saxony state government not only played down the coronavirus danger but also sought to make far-right virus deniers socially acceptable and regularly offered them a platform. As it had done previously for Pegida, Pro Chemnitz and other far-right movements, the state executive of State Premier Michael Kretschmer (CDU) expressed much understanding for the “concerned citizens” or denied their far-right sentiments.

At the end of April, on the anniversary of Adolf Hitler’s birthday, the city council allowed Pegida to hold a rally on Dresden’s Altmarkt. As late as May, the state premier held a personal discussion with coronavirus deniers in the Dresden Großer Garten (Great Garden) in a very confined space and without wearing a mask. The right-wing extremists were allowed to demonstrate in the same way on several occasions. On November 7 in Leipzig, several thousand not only violated the coronavirus requirements under the eyes of the police but also attacked journalists and counter-demonstrators. Expressions of solidarity between the police and right-wing extremists were also reported several times.

While the far-right coronavirus deniers were able to spread their anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, the state government put a no less right-wing programme into action. Although infections escalated, by November at the latest, it stuck to its useless “lockdown light.” Schools, day-care centres and businesses continued to operate without restrictions into December. Only public events, gastronomy and the like were restricted.

Only when the Saxony-wide incidence rate exceeded the 400 mark—eight times the RKI guideline value for school closures—and school protests began in several German cities, did the Saxony state government react and suspended regular operations in schools and day-care centres from December 14 until January 8. In the same week, non-essential retail stores were closed, but otherwise, the government limited itself to appeals to work at home as much as possible.

The indifference of governments contrasts sharply with the social solidarity within the population and the willingness of medical staff to make sacrifices. On December 14, for example, Görlitz hospital issued an “urgent call for help” via Facebook “due to increasing cases” and “decreasing availability of hospital staff.” Within a few days, more than 100 people came forward, 34 of whom are now working in three shifts until February to help with patient care (serving meals, cleaning rooms, helping with personal hygiene, etc.). Among them are short-time workers, unemployed, pupils, pensioners and students.

As far as is known, the so-called lockdown in Saxony is to be extended beyond 10 January 10. However, no one should be under any illusions. Other state governments are already pushing for relaxations amid the mass dying. The state education ministers of Baden-Württemberg and North Rhine-Westphalia, with support from business and politician, are pushing for the opening of schools and kindergartens.

Only the independent intervention of the working class to close schools, kindergartens and factories, with full compensation to teachers, workers and others, can ensure that the pandemic is brought under control and the deadly danger to millions is averted.



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