

German teachers' union backs in-person learning as COVID-19 deaths soar

Martin Nowak, Christoph Vandreier
7 January 2021

The wave of deaths and new infections sweeping across Germany and Europe is the direct result of the policies of the federal and state governments. Businesses, schools and day care centres were kept open and the most basic safety standards disregarded to secure corporate profits. The current lockdown in Germany deliberately allows many businesses and schools to remain operational.

In enforcing these inhumane policies, the federal and state governments, consisting of a broad range of political coalitions, can rely on the close cooperation of Germany's trade unions. The German Trade Union Confederation (DGB) supported the billion-dollar bailout packages for banks and corporations back in March.

IG Metall, Verdi and Germany's other major unions subsequently did everything in their power to ensure that the country's auto plants, distribution centres and public transport remained fully operational, even under the most adverse and unsafe conditions, thereby exposing workers to massive health risks. This was the path taken to make good the billions handed out to the rich.

Schools and day care centres were also kept open to ensure that parents went to work, although it has been proven scientifically that schools are key factors for the spread of the pandemic. According to the figures issued by the main official health institute, Robert Koch Institute (RKI), over 20,000 teachers, teaching assistants and child care workers have been infected so far, along with 40,000 children. Seventeen teachers and care workers have died from COVID-19.

The German government finally responded and announced the closure of schools, initially until January 10 and now until the end of the month, only after parents and teachers increasingly expressed their opposition and pupils took strike action to demand safe conditions. In fact, most of the current "lockdown" took place during the Christmas vacations when schools were closed anyway. In addition, schools and day care centres were specifically told to ensure in-person care for the children of workers employed in non-essential businesses, thereby turning schools into mere

custodial institutions.

This criminal policy is supported by the main teacher's union, the Education and Science Workers' Union (GEW), which has close links to the German government. When the federal and state governments announced the "lockdown" over Christmas, the union threw its weight behind the fraudulent scheme, describing school closures as "most regrettable." It also immediately renewed its five-point program for restoring full regular operation of schools and day care centres beginning January 11.

In doing so, the GEW demands fall short of the official recommendations of the Robert Koch Institute, which proposed the dividing up of classes when the incidence of coronavirus infections exceeds the level stipulated by the RKI. The GEW, on the other hand, called for alternating classes to start only in the fifth grade, an age when children no longer need all-day care and parents can go to work despite reduced school hours, thereby guaranteeing dividends for the corporations.

The GEW plan does not envisage any dividing up of groups for day care centres, including high-risk groups, which, the union declares, should only receive "advice from company doctors"!

According to the wretched GEW, schools and day care centres can resume operations in January without mobile ventilation systems, which would cost just 100 euros (\$US123) per student. Such ventilation could be installed, the union states, only when windows cannot be opened, i.e., the union expects lessons to take place with frequently opened windows in freezing weather.

In light of this policy, the union's other demands such as the "purchase of digital terminals," the creation of "hazard analyses" and improved hygiene, free tests and flu shots, are nothing more than window dressing aimed at cloaking the criminal dangers involved by continuing in-person schooling. With its limited demands for safety measures, the GEW is only covering up its support for the unsafe opening of schools and day care centres.

An example of such diversionary measures was provided

by the GEW in Bavaria with its legal action aimed at obtaining a temporary injunction to ensure compliance with the minimum distance of 1.5 meters at schools. The union deliberately filed the claim as a representative action and not, for example, in support of a teacher's individual claim. This meant the court was able to dismiss the claim on formal grounds alone. The necessity of the distance compliance at schools was not even addressed in the court and the lawsuit merely provided the background music for the unsafe opening up of schools.

In fact, the GEW has supported government policy throughout the entire period of the pandemic. As the pandemic spread across Germany and scientists and the WSWS called for the closure of businesses and schools, Federal Education Minister Anja Karliczek (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) declared on March 12 that nationwide school closures were "not on the agenda at this time" and that efforts were being made to "maintain normal operations for as long as possible." The GEW supported this policy at the time with a cynical emergency program "for hot water, disinfectants, soap and disposable towels."

Following the spring closure of schools after widespread opposition to their continuing operation, a comprehensive campaign to reopen them began just a few weeks later. Here again, the GEW took the lead and, in the midst of the first wave of the pandemic, formulated conditions on April 14 for "a gradual opening of day care centres and schools." The demands merely called for improvements in washrooms and toilets, minimum distances to be upheld and the pompous but meaningless slogan of "making hygiene a top priority."

Finally, at the end of the summer vacations, federal and state governments decided to switch to unprotected regular operation. The only token measures advised were regular ventilation of school rooms and, in some places, the obligation to wear masks. The GEW has rejected the latter measure on several occasions and most recently in August described mask wearing as "pedagogically nonsensical."

In the contract negotiations for public sector workers held in September and October, the GEW demonstrated that its policy of opening up schools was an integral part of a broad offensive against employees. Together with the Verdi, GdP and IG BAU unions, the GEW negotiated a drastic reduction of real wages for the majority of teachers, garbage workers, care workers, bus drivers and other occupational groups, who have stood in the front line during the pandemic.

At the same time, the unions ensured that the massive discontent on the part of workers over unsafe working conditions, the risk of contagion and excessive work schedules was quashed and that businesses could operate as usual, although conditions remained entirely unsafe. For the majority of workers who participated in large numbers in the

unions' warning strikes, workplace safety and pandemic control were at the center of their concerns. For their part, the unions refused to raise a single demand related to workplace safety.

**** Photo: GEW chairperson Marlis Tepe (Ziko van Dijk, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons)

The GEW has also gone so far as to support the federal government's vaccination rankings. On December 18, GEW president Marlis Tepe described the fact that police officers are to be vaccinated before teachers and child care workers as "fundamentally okay." According to the union, a highly equipped state apparatus has priority over the health of teachers, students and teaching assistants.

With its policy of opening up schools, the GEW is continuing its decades-long function as an accomplice of the state apparatus. In Berlin, for example, the union worked closely together with the city's former Social Democratic Party (SPD)-Left Party coalition and now cooperates with the current SPD-Left Party-Green Party Senate to run down the city's education system. Working hours for teachers and other staff have increased without wage compensation, vacation and Christmas bonuses have been cut and wages reduced.

The coronavirus pandemic has revealed the thoroughly reactionary nature of the unions. Far from representing the interests of workers, they enforce the program of pandemic fatalities and massive social inequality. The result is tens of thousands of deaths, mass layoffs and loss of income for workers to ensure fabulous profits for a small elite.

To protect their lives and defend their interests, teachers and child care workers, together with workers in other sectors, must free themselves from the union straitjacket and build independent action committees to prepare a general strike to oppose the government's deadly pandemic policy. This is the perspective of the Socialist Equality Party and the Fourth International.



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