

German schools and day-care centres to reopen despite record death rates and new infections

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At the end of last week, the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) reported 31,849 new infections and another 1,188 COVID deaths in Germany, more than ever before. As a proportion of population, the death rate in Germany is now higher than in the US, where more than 4,000 deaths were registered on Friday. The Washington-based Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) estimates that the German government's current pandemic policy will have cost more than 91,000 lives by April 1.

The rate of those testing positive is 16 percent, more than three times the World Health Organisation threshold beyond which a pandemic is considered "out of control." While crematoria often cannot keep up with the burial of corpses and hospitals throughout the country are on the verge of collapse, the education ministers in Germany's federal states have decided on a "resumption of face-to-face teaching" as soon as possible, even though schools are central drivers of the pandemic.

The systematic reopening policy was reaffirmed on Tuesday by the Conference of the Federal and State Governments, whose decision does not envisage a single closure of offices and factories, and decrees "emergency childcare" in day-care centres and schools, which is supposed to make it impossible for workers to obtain leave of absence from their managers.

This policy is being enforced particularly aggressively in the states governed by the Social Democrats (SPD), the Greens and the Left Party. The Berlin Senate (state executive), a coalition of the SPD, Greens and Left Party, had initially planned to send all graduating classes back to face-to-face classes as early as this week, and the first to third-grade classes a week later. "I want to get into face-to-face teaching as urgently as possible," Michael Müller, Berlin mayor and chairman of the Conference of State Premiers, said yesterday in the Berlin House of Representatives (state legislature).

Due to overwhelming opposition among parents, teachers and school directors, the state government was finally forced to postpone the reintroduction of general compulsory attendance until January 25. Meanwhile, however, schools and day-care centres are to remain open to provide childcare so that parents can be forced to work. Examinations are also to be "carried out on-site in all types of schools," Education Senator (state minister) Sandra Scheeres (SPD) declared.

Only a few hours earlier, the education administration had rejected an urgent application by several Berlin school heads who had requested a postponement of the school openings. An online petition launched by teachers titled "No face-to-face teaching in Berlin as long

as COVID-19 is not under control" had garnered 40,000 signatures within a few days.

The petition states that with its policy, "the Berlin Senate is prolonging the course of the pandemic in length and extent in an unforeseeable way. [Mayor Müller and Minister Scheeres] are pouring oil on the fire where containment is needed. They are making a mockery of the efforts of society as a whole to survive the pandemic as unscathed as possible."

Those affected, according to the authors of the petition, were lonely home residents, tradespeople threatened with bankruptcy and "patients in hospitals who suffer and die alone."

While the herd immunity policy has already led to mass deaths, especially in intensive care units and old people's homes, reports of fatally ill educators, transport workers and even children are also increasing. According to the official figures, around 800 children suffering from COVID-19 had to receive intensive medical treatment in Germany between March and the end of December. In Berlin alone, 12 children are currently in the coronavirus intensive care unit.

According to data from the health insurers Barmer and AOK, educators, followed by caregivers and teachers, are by far the most at risk of contracting COVID-19.

Most recently, a 44-year-old nursery schoolteacher in Kamen, Westphalia, died. At the "showcase facility" nominated for the German Day-Care Award 2021, the largest officially confirmed day-care outbreak to date occurred in December, with 41 infected children and employees, despite "all hygiene rules [being] observed." The RKI currently lists 19 educators who died from coronavirus in its statistics. Five hundred others have had to be hospitalised.

"Pupils, teachers and educators are not being protected," educator Eileen T. from Saxony told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "The winter holidays have been shortened by one week and brought forward to guarantee seven weeks of face-to-face teaching afterwards. Graduating classes are to return to classrooms in groups as early as January 18." The Saxony state government's policy has meant that crematoria across the region have been overwhelmed by incoming coronavirus bodies for weeks, with corpses piling up in hospital cold stores, some as high as six feet.

Although the situation in the neighbouring states of Brandenburg and Thuringia is similarly devastating, the reopening of schools and day-care centres there is also being pursued with the same intransigence in the interest of big business. In Brandenburg, all final-year classes and special schools are undertaking in-person teaching and day-care centres are open. The Education and Science Union

(GEW) in Potsdam backed this policy and declared that further “opening” must be “thoroughly prepared.”

In Thuringia, State Premier Bodo Ramelow (Left Party) called Friday for a “lockdown for the whole economy,” after having decided the exact opposite only a few days earlier, together with Chancellor Merkel and the heads of the Länder (federal states). Ramelow has strictly rejected all—even local—lockdown measures since the beginning of the pandemic and has publicly embraced the “herd immunity” policy advocated by the Swedish government. As a result, Thuringia has the second-highest seven-day incidence (297) and the lowest vaccination rate (3.7 doses per 1,000 inhabitants) nationwide. In many districts, up to 35 percent of all day-care children are in so-called “emergency childcare” without staff being adequately protected.

“Various recent studies show that day-care centres are among the high-risk areas,” said educator Elli F. in an interview with WSWS. “The health insurance companies confirm a high COVID risk among educators and the number of children in day-care with antibodies is six times higher than reported cases. Instead of following the motto ‘AHA+L’ [keep your distance, observe hygiene, wear a mask and ventilate], we tend to follow HLH: wash your hands, ventilate and hope it goes well.”

Elli strongly opposes the herd immunity policy of opening schools, day-care centres and businesses amid the pandemic. “I’m a high-risk patient—heart, diabetic, pulmonary. If I get COVID-19, I will suffer severe consequential damage or die. Every time I go to work in the morning, I’m playing Russian roulette. I receive no protection from the employer and receive no help from the GEW. My fundamental right to the inviolability of the person is obviously opposed to the economic interests of the employer, Senate and state. This is a way to save pension benefits by sacrificing the elderly. Yet I am only 53 and actually wanted to live a little longer.”

An additional threat to the working class brought about by official pandemic politics is the coronavirus mutant B.1.1.7, which is now responsible for one in two new infections in Britain. Although the federal and state governments only analyse the genome of the virus in every 900th case, the virus strain has also been detected in Germany since Christmas Eve. According to British researchers, it is up to 70 percent more contagious than all other variants of SARS-CoV-2 detected so far.

The variant had spread in Britain under conditions of a supposed “lockdown,” especially in schools that remained open. According to virologist Christian Drosten of Berlin’s Charité hospital, the whole thing started “with a lot of tailwind in the schools” and from there “spread on to the normal population.”

Virologist Isabella Eckerle, a professor at the Centre for Emerging Viral Diseases in Geneva, made a gloomy prediction to news website *Zeit Online* earlier this week, “I think the variant will spread in the rest of Europe just as it has in Britain.” This, Eckerle said, worried her “a lot.” The “idea that you can specifically contain this one variant, while you haven’t been able to get a grip on the previous incidence of infection for months already, is completely illusory.”

If it is confirmed that the new variant is much more contagious than the previous ones, the danger of even worse mass deaths in Europe and around the world looms. Mathematician and epidemiologist Adam Kucharski of the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine points out on Twitter that easier transmissibility, as opposed to an increased fatality rate, exerts an exponential effect on the rise in deaths.

Tagesspiegel reported the first case of the variant in Berlin. In the affected family from Steglitz-Zehlendorf, it had only taken one day, “then everyone was sick.” Although a positive PCR (Polymerase chain reaction) test was already available on Christmas Eve, the health department has still not managed to identify all contacts. The time delay over the holidays, according to the newspaper, made contact tracing now additionally “difficult.”

In countries bordering Germany, the virus is also already rampant. Dutch health authorities, for example, reported 50 cases of the new virus variant on Wednesday—30 of which were linked to a single primary school. In Denmark, where 11 percent of all positive coronavirus cases are sequenced, the proportion of B.1.1.7 rose from 0.2 to 2.3 percent between calendar weeks 49 and 52. Austria recently announced that three of the five detected infections with B.1.1.7 were children.

On the “Heute-Journal” news broadcast, Isabella Eckerle added that it would be “much more difficult in the future to contain the incidence of infection with existing measures” and warned of a “big third wave.” It was known “from RNA viruses that they can adapt relatively quickly. This means that if you put pressure on them—for example, with antibodies—then variants can prevail that are perhaps slightly less attacked by our immune response.”

Against this background, the virologist warned of the high evolutionary selection pressure that the wrong vaccination strategy could exert. “The discussion that you might only give one vaccine dose I personally think is dangerous because you will then have a large population that only has weak immunity and thus open the door for this virus to continue to develop such mutations.” Already, she said, one observes “variants that have opened the door a bit to mutate under this vaccine.” The scientist concludes that “The whole of Europe would need a coordinated lockdown.”

This demand, supported across Europe by more than 1,000 scientists and researchers, is diametrically opposed to the policies of Germany’s federal and state governments. While day-care centres and schools are being forced to open, and not a single industrial enterprise is being closed, a representative survey by the Hans Böckler Foundation showed that in November, only 14 percent of all employees were mainly working from home.

Under these conditions, everything depends on establishing action committees of teachers, students and workers to intervene independently of the establishment parties and trade unions to put an end to the politics of death. All the parties in the Bundestag (federal parliament) and governments of all colours are equally pursuing such a policy and are supported in this by the trade unions.

To enforce the closure of schools and non-essential businesses, it is necessary to organise a European-wide general strike and fight for a socialist programme. Demands that must be raised include providing billions of dollars of investment into safe education, full replacement income for parents who must stay at home to look after their children and full protection for those in high-risk groups and all essential workers on the front line of the fight against the pandemic.



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