

Massive protest in Berlin against plans to reopen schools

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Teachers, parents and students have responded with massive protests against the plans of the Berlin Senate (state executive) to largely reopen schools amid rising infection figures. But despite this opposition and clear scientific evidence that schools are a major driver of the pandemic, the state government of the Social Democrats (SPD), Greens and Left Party is sticking to the herd immunity policy in the interests of big business.

The Senate had initially planned to send back all graduating classes as early as next week and the lower classes a week later. A complete return to face-to-face teaching was then planned from mid-February. “I want to return to face-to-face teaching as urgently as possible,” Berlin’s mayor Michael Müller (SPD) told the House of Representatives (state legislature).

Given the dramatic rise in coronavirus infections in the capital, the Senate’s decision triggered a storm of indignation that forced it to partially withdraw its plans on Friday evening.

Christoph Podewils, a Berlin family man, started an online petition demanding “No face-to-face teaching in Berlin until COVID-19 is under control,” which had garnered more than 45,000 signatures by the weekend. The petition demanded that Müller and Education Senator (state minister) Sandra Scheeres (SPD) reverse their “irresponsible decision.” Previously, educators had also addressed Scheeres in an open letter.

Several Berlin schools also resisted the Senate’s decision. The head of the Steglitz Fichtenberg grammar school, Andreas Steiner, said in *Tagesspiegel*, “In my opinion, the planned reopening of schools is irresponsible and negligent. Our employer’s actions in this regard pose a threat to the efforts of society as a whole to contain the pandemic and disproportionately risk the health of teachers, students and the health of affected families.”

A headteacher from Treptow-Köpenick told broadcaster rbb that she would definitely not open her school on Monday. Earlier, schools in the Neukölln district had opposed the decision. Richard Gamp, spokesperson for the

state school board, demanded that reliable figures on the current incidence of infections be available before schools could be reopened.

The state parents’ committee reacted with outrage, “Domestic contacts are being reduced to one person. But in schools, pupils from up to 16 households are allowed to meet with their teachers in classrooms.”

On social media, numerous posts objected to the dangerous reopening of schools. Under hashtags such as #KeepSchoolsandNurseriesClosed, hundreds of posts against the Senate’s policy appeared in a short time.

After the Senate’s partial retreat, Ralf Treptow of the Association of Senior School Principals remarked, “Once again, the question arises why the senator always has to wait until her back is against the wall to meet fundamental demands from practitioners.”

After the protests, individual representatives of the Greens and the Left Party welcomed the postponement of school reopenings. But this cannot hide the fact that they had fully supported the original decision to reopen. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the Senate coalition has been one of the champions of the policy of keeping schools and day-care centres open. The result is alarmingly high infection rates and overburdened hospitals.

In the meantime, more than 105,000 people have been infected with the virus in Berlin; 1,560 have died from it. At the end of the week, the new virus mutation was detected in Berlin for the first time, which may be significantly more contagious than the previous strain. According to researchers, there are initial indications that children are even more susceptible to this new variation of the virus than adults, which increases the risk if schools and day-care centres open. In the last three days, the incidence rate in Berlin has risen from 130.6 to 191.7 per 100,000. Berlin’s Charité hospital recently extended its emergency programme and imposed a ban on visits.

The devastating consequences of reopening schools were most recently made public by the tragic death of Soydan A., a teacher at a community school in Berlin-Kreuzberg. The

young educator had almost certainly contracted the disease while at school. But even such events leave the government representatives cold.

Until the very end, Müller and Scheeres defended their irresponsible policy. With her usual arrogance and callousness, Scheeres even told *Tagesspiegel* that she had received “quite a few emails” encouraging her to stick with the reopening decision despite the protests. With the originally planned return to face-to-face teaching from Monday, she had done “exactly what parents and school administrators wanted.”

The SPD politician described the reopening, which would have put the health and lives of thousands of teachers and pupils at risk, as “a conscious decision, a well-considered decision.” She said that a responsible balance had to be struck between the need to protect health and the right to education. Her Green coalition partner said the same. “Every day of lockdown means another day of widening the gap between those who can learn and those who cannot,” said Green Party parliamentary group leader Silke Gebel.

The regulations that have now been passed also offer no protection for pupils, teachers and educators. Also, the Senate has left no doubt that it wants to reintroduce compulsory attendance as soon as possible.

Home learning for pupils in grades 1 to 9 will be extended until January 25, Scheeres announced. For the final years, 10-13, at grammar schools and secondary schools, however, attendance in small groups will be possible as early as next week. The respective schools can decide for themselves whether to offer so-called alternating lessons, with learning at home and school or only at home.

Attendance for final-year classes poses a double risk. Not only are the students and teachers exposed to danger at the schools themselves, but they also must travel to school—mostly by public transport. Graduating classes are those age groups that are currently infected with COVID-19 at a higher-than-average rate.

Inessa criticised the Senate’s decision, telling WSWs, “Any teaching in schools is highly dangerous to health.” Inessa is due to take an exam at an upper secondary school in Berlin-Charlottenburg this week, although there have already been several cases of infection at the school and classes have had to be quarantined. “Ms. Scheeres’ policy of reopening schools in the face of the millions of COVID-19 deaths worldwide is so intolerably inhumane that this woman should be locked up.” It was incomprehensible to the pupil that online lessons were not being organised in such a way that they are “reasonable and function properly.”

This is also confirmed by Frank (name changed), a primary school teacher who works in Berlin-Mitte. He complained that he feels abandoned by the Senate. For

example, urgently needed materials for online teaching were only now being delivered. “Who is supposed to quickly instruct the children in using the [electronic] devices now under these conditions?” FFP2 masks had only arrived in the last week, and far too few, Frank added.

Like Inessa, Frank is appalled by the Senate’s policy, saying, “Even though the virus was already going through the school, masks were only mandatory in the corridors.” Teachers and students are being pushed into an impossible situation by the Senate. “Why doesn’t anyone listen to the recommendations of the scientific community?” They had long identified schools as the drivers of the pandemic, he said.

In Inessa’s view, reopening schools was “complete madness.” She condemned the hypocrisy of the SPD, Greens and the Left Party, who are supposedly concerned about children’s education. “If they were committed to good education, they would have provided better facilities at schools years ago, with enough school materials, more teachers and hygienic toilets.”

The situation at day-care centres is also significant. These remain in emergency operation. With businesses open, this means that parents are still being forced to bring their children to a day-care centre in order to work, continuing to expose educators, children and their parents to the risk of infections. Twitter user “mpo” commented, “My child’s day-care centre in Berlin has 190 children; 160 are now in emergency care. Any more questions why the ‘lockdown’ isn’t working?”

To counter the unscrupulous policies of the coalition in the Berlin Senate, students, parents, teachers and educators must take the fight into their own hands. Action committees independent of the establishment parties and trade unions must be built and strikes organised to shut schools and non-essential businesses to put an end to the criminal herd immunity policy. It is crucial to conduct this offensive based on a socialist perspective. As is vividly demonstrated in Berlin, all the Bundestag (parliamentary) parties and governments are committed to policies that put profits above human lives.



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