

Germany records highest daily coronavirus death toll as fatalities double in just one month

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Daily new infections of around 20,000, incidences of over 600 infections per 100,000 inhabitants over the past seven days in some districts, and an R (reproduction) rate that has remained permanently above 1: all of these facts show that the pandemic is raging out of control in Germany. The federal and state governments claim that a tougher lockdown came into force on January 11. However, all of industry, offices, most schools and childcare facilities, and public transport are operating as usual. The coronavirus is running rampant and the deaths are piling up.

On Wednesday, the Robert Koch Institute, Germany's federal agency for infectious diseases, reported a further 1,060 deaths over the previous 24 hours. Yesterday, the RKI registered a new daily record with 1,244 deaths. Around the world, approximately 2 million people have died, including over 600,000 in Europe, if Russia is included. Germany is among the European countries with the highest number of deaths. Since December 12, the number of coronavirus deaths has more than doubled to over 43,500. Many workers have died, including Berlin tram driver Sven B., 49, and Berlin teacher Soldan A., 38.

Last week, a 44-year-old childcare worker in the Westphalian town of Kamen died after becoming infected in the largest recorded outbreak in a childcare facility to date. The St. Marien childcare centre was closed on December 16 after mass infections. Of the 12 staff and 65 children, 41 tested positive for the virus. According to the RKI, five teachers have died from coronavirus since December and at least 503 teachers and childcare workers are currently so sick that they are being treated in intensive care.

At the same time, the new variant of the virus, B.1.1.7, which led to the collapse of parts of the health care system in London, is now spreading in Germany. It is approximately one and a half times more infectious than the previous strain. In Ireland, the new variant has caused the seven-day incidence to explode from 41 per 100,000 inhabitants before Christmas to more than 940 today.

Another feature of the new and extremely infectious variant of coronavirus is that it spreads with particular rapidity among

children. A large-scale British study revealed that children in the 11 to 16 age group were at higher risk of infection and were more likely to pass it on to family members, friends and acquaintances than before. This makes the complete shutdown of schools and childcare facilities all the more urgent.

This was the demand made by more than 1,000 scientists, who called in mid-December for a coordinated Europe-wide lockdown to bring infection rates to a level that would allow health agencies to trace and isolate each case. However, politicians of all governing parties refused to conduct this struggle against the virus. This is why the WSW and Socialist Equality Party have long been calling for the establishment of action committees in every workplace and educational institution with the aim of preparing a national and European political general strike in order to seize control of the struggle to contain the virus.

Support for this among workers is growing rapidly. New initiatives by students, parents and childcare workers show they are not prepared to become the victims of politicians who see the growing number of corpses as a price worth paying. A petition on change.org last week opposing the reopening of schools obtained 50,000 signatures in a short period of time.

In Berlin, childcare workers addressed a sharply worded letter on Tuesday to Education Senator Sandra Scheeres (Social Democratic Party, SPD). They have an inadequate number of FFP2 masks and test opportunities in childcare centres, never mind air filtering systems. In addition, they demanded to be given higher priority for vaccines. Childcare workers, who are among the groups with the highest infection rate, are effectively being sent to the slaughter during the pandemic. The state Senate even called on parents in writing to avoid a loss of earnings from their jobs by sending their children to the emergency care provided by childcare centres.

Educational institutions must be kept open so that the economy keeps running and profits flow uninterrupted. This is why workplace outbreaks are being ignored, even though many are taking place. One example is the outbreaks in meatpacking plants, which are barely mentioned anymore by the media. At the Vion meat packing plant in Kreilsheim, Baden-

Württemberg, 23 workers have tested positive for COVID-19, but the local health authority agreed to let the plant continue operating. During November and December, there were mass outbreaks in the plants in Vilshofen (100 infected) and Landshut (43 infected).

Hardly anything about working conditions or the coronavirus situation in the auto or auto parts industries is being reported. The government refuses in principle to expand lockdown measures to production sites, restricting itself instead to “urgent appeals” directed by Labour Minister Hubertus Heil to big business. “The assembly lines are running, and that’s how it should remain as long as possible,” he told the DPA.

This makes it easy for businesses simply to ignore such “urgent appeals” or dismiss them arrogantly. Nobody has invented welding from home, said Siegfried Russwurm, the new president of the Federal Association of German Industry (BDI). Russwurm was formerly an executive at Siemens and is on the advisory board of meatpacking operator Tönnies. Federal Employers Association (BDA) head of business affairs, Stefan Kampeter, described the government’s appeals as “unnecessary” and “useless” in an interview on public broadcaster ARD’s “Morgenmagazin” on Tuesday. He roundly condemned a legal right for employees to work from home, and claimed, despite knowing better, that such a measure would not reduce the number of infections.

State politicians are coming up with ever more cynical justifications to reopen schools and childcare facilities. One example of this is the new president of the Conference of Education Ministers (KMK), Britta Ernst (SPD). Claiming that the states “don’t want automatism,” she rejected nationwide regulations in comments on the “Tagesthemen” show. With unmatched cynicism, Ernst added, “We have made an exception for classes in their final year so that students don’t have to bear the biggest burden during the pandemic.”

The minister is well acquainted with cynical justifications. Ernst did not have a years-long career as a teacher or childcare worker to qualify for her current post. No, the former property sales agent with a diploma in economics can look back over a 30-year party career in the SPD’s “Hamburg clique.” She is the wife of Olaf Scholz, who served as mayor of Hamburg for several years and is now federal finance minister. Scholz has compensated the banks and big business with billions from his “bazooka,” while the self-employed and artists have received a few crumbs and thousands of workers have been laid off.

Ernst will of course know Ties Rabe from Hamburg, the city state’s education senator, who shamelessly lied about virus outbreaks in Hamburg’s schools. The vice presidents of the KMK are the already-mentioned Scheeres from Berlin and Stefanie Hubig, the education minister in Rhineland-Palatinate. The third vice president is Karin Prien (Christian Democratic Union, CDU), the education minister in Schleswig-Holstein, who recently argued for the reopening of schools with the cynical remark, “You’ll find more fresh air in a school building

than any office in Germany.”

In a bid to silence the mounting criticism and calls for the closure of schools and workplaces from the working class, politicians, television moderators and the media have unleashed a barrage of propaganda against an effective lockdown.

The starting gun was sounded by a discussion organised by the right-wing *Bild* newspaper with politicians, which gave the Green Party’s mayor of Thübingen, Boris Palmer, the opportunity to rail against the coronavirus restrictions. “It’s enough now,” complained the notorious right-winger Palmer. “At the beginning of February we must reopen in a controlled way.” He added, “We have to live too,” a remark that obviously doesn’t apply to industrial workers, care workers or childcare professionals. Neither SPD politician Karl Lauterbach nor any another participant were willing to challenge these right-wing tirades, and the *Bild* moderator denounced the government’s inadequate lockdown measures in the style of the AfD.

A similar development occurred on ARD’s “Hard but fair” show on Monday evening. Susanne Gaschke, a journalist with *Die Welt*, and economics professor Michael Hüther ridiculed leading scientists Janssens, Drosten, Priesemann, Eckerle and Brinkmann. Their demand for a lockdown to bring infections below an incidence of 50 cases per 100,000 inhabitants within seven days was like burying society under a slab of concrete, they said. It is clear that due to the weather in winter, the incidence cannot drop below 100, they claimed. Gaschke asserted that it is “simply impossible” to reduce the virus to zero. Hüther added, “We will have to deal with the virus permanently. We will permanently have coronavirus deaths, so we cannot allow the economy to be shut down. We should be happy that the supply chains are running and the economy is stable.”

Cihan Çelik, a lung doctor who leads a coronavirus isolation ward, and participated in the programme, described the grisly consequences of such views. He was himself infected with COVID-19. The 34-year-old, who was in good shape and had no previous health issues, noticed he had a sore throat and was in intensive care 24 hours later. “Within a few hours, I only had one lung I could breathe through properly,” reported the doctor, who also spoke about 13-hour shifts and staff shortages in the hospitals. Summing up, he said, “You don’t meet any coronavirus deniers in the hospital.”



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