

German federal and state governments reject consistent lockdown measures

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On Tuesday, the heads of the German Länder (federal states) met again with Chancellor Angela Merkel to discuss pandemic measures. On the same day, the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) again reported almost 1,000 coronavirus deaths.

The new coronavirus variant, which is already ravaging Ireland, Portugal and Spain, in addition to Britain, is taking centre stage in Germany as well. Other mutations have been discovered in South Africa and Brazil. Yet the politicians at both the federal and state level continue to insist on keeping workplaces, schools and day care centres open and rejecting any serious restrictions on the economy.

A “radical change of strategy” is being increasingly demanded from doctors and virologists, as well as from school children and kindergarten teachers. A joint declaration by scientists from all over Europe, first published in the journal *The Lancet*, bears the signatures of well over a thousand scientists, including Christian Drosten and the head of the RKI, Lothar Wieler. “The virus does not respect national borders,” Prof. Isabella Eckerle told the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (NZZ). What is needed, she said, is a coordinated, complete lockdown across Europe.

This policy is supported by signers of a petition titled “ZeroCovid,” whose initial signatories include some 400 scientists, medical professionals, artists and journalists. The petition easily reached its first target of 75,000 signatures in Germany. It reads: “To stop the virus and prevent further deaths in the tens of thousands, a pause of solidarity is now necessary... We must shut down all non-socially necessary sectors of the economy for a time.”

A group of doctors has written directly to the federal government, stating that there should be “no room for a so-called ‘herd immunity strategy.’ Denying facts and watering down scientific proposals must not be allowed to further negatively influence political decisions.”

The imperative of a hard lockdown is all the more urgent given that vaccination has already begun. The new, even more contagious mutant strains have already been detected in Berlin, Bavaria, Hesse and Baden-Württemberg.

A medical professional wrote on Twitter: “If we take [coronavirus mutation] B.1.1.7 seriously, we should now vaccinate around the clock as if disaster had struck. Because it

has.”

But the vaccination rollout is a debacle. It is going much more slowly than necessary because every step is subordinated to the profit interests of the pharmaceutical companies.

There can be no doubt that government officials are unwavering in keeping the profits flowing. “Profits before human lives” is the unspoken motto, which prevailed again at the Federal-Länder Round Table on Tuesday.

It was agreed to extend the previous, half-hearted measures until 14 February, but not tighten them significantly, so as to not restrict non-essential production and service companies. The only new step is to make compulsory in the future the wearing of an FFP2 mask or surgical mask in public spaces and on public transport.

The government officials did not even pass a truly binding resolution on the issue of working from home. At present, only about 15 percent of employees work from home, whereas in April 2020, more than twice as many people worked from home. Now, the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs is to issue a temporary decree urging employers to allow working from home “wherever it is possible” and “provided operations allow it.” These woolly formulations leave so many loopholes that much will remain the same.

In recent days, several state heads and education ministers were still urging that schools and day care centres be kept open. These include Susanne Eisenmann, the education minister of Baden-Württemberg, and the education ministers of North Rhine-Westphalia, Hesse, Hamburg and Berlin. The consequences of the half-measures called for by the highest levels of government are predictable: trains and buses will remain full, millions of employees will be forced into workplaces every day, and children will be sent to schools and day care centres in order to keep production running.

Berlin journalist and author Markus Feldenkirchen commented sarcastically in the newsweekly *Der Spiegel*, “Of course, priority is given to manufacturers of pork chops, downhill skis, egg liqueur, rapid-fire weapons, toasters and cigarettes. To produce them, millions of people may continue to gather in closed rooms—as if there were no virus at all.”

Not surprisingly, the pandemic continues to accelerate. On Tuesday, nearly 11,369 new infections were reported in one

day. The number of coronavirus deaths rose to a total of 47,622, with 989 new deaths. The seven-day incidence rate is still many times too high, with officially 131.5 infected persons per 100,000 inhabitants.

These figures may be grossly incomplete. This was recently pointed out by the Central Institute for Statutory Health Insurance (Zi). The research institute wrote in a concerned press release on Thursday, 14 January that far too often overburdened health offices report case numbers too late or incompletely.

“Given systematic reporting delays, as in the current calculation procedure,” there is a danger that “individual districts will permanently appear in the statistics with infection incidence values that are too low,” the Zi wrote. For this reason, the Zi stressed that it was “urgently necessary” to look at other central aspects of infection incidence rates, above all, the utilisation of intensive care units and the incidence in risk groups.

The situation in hospitals and overcrowded intensive care units is highly threatening. Large parts of the nursing staff are increasingly becoming infected—similar to the situation in Britain. In a hospital in North Friesland, 2,200 people have been in quarantine since Tuesday, after 73 staff and 60 patients tested positive for the coronavirus. The hospital has imposed a general admission ban.

A district hospital in Ansbach in eastern Franconia also reported that 33 patients and 29 staff members had become infected.

The situation in numerous crematoria is gruesome. In Saxony, deaths doubled in December, according to the Federal Statistical Office. Pictures of chaotically stacked coffins from the Meissen crematorium circulated in the news, while coffins in Zittau had to be stored temporarily outside the crematorium.

In an interview with gmx.net, undertaker Tobias Wenzel from the Erzgebirge region explained that he was unable to “even begin to imagine” such a situation. He said that undertakers and crematoria staff in Saxony had to cope with “at least a third more funerals than usual.” He added, “At the moment, we are just managing.”

Wenzel had worked 280 hours in December, and his hours were by no means exceptional. He concludes the interview with a bitter indictment of the responsible politicians for failing to act when experts warned during the summer of exactly such a situation.

Government officials at all levels will continue to fail to act. Not even the gruesome scenes at crematoria, reminiscent of images from Bergamo in Italy last spring, can change their minds. The demand for a tougher lockdown, including all non-essential production, is highly popular among working people, as petitions by scientists and “ZeroCovid” show.

But the federal and state governments will not be swayed by pressure. From the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) to the Christian Democrats (CDU), Free Democrats (FDP), Social

Democrats (SPD), Greens and the Left Party: all the establishment politicians are aligning themselves with the needs of the banks and corporations.

“I don’t want us to have to run down our entire economy,” declared Federal Labour Minister Hubertus Heil (Social Democratic Party—SPD) shortly before the discussion round in the Chancellery. Meanwhile, several leading business representatives were able to air their views in *Der Spiegel*. Under the headline, “Top economists warn against economic lockdown,” they emphasised almost word for word that a shutdown of the economy was out of the question.

The President of the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW) and Humboldt Professor Marcel Tratzscher said, “A forced closure of companies... could disrupt supply chains and thus cause considerable costs for the entire economy... A work from home obligation could cause great economic damage, as it could severely damage effective working hours and productivity.”

These bosses receive support from the trade unions. In an interview with the *Augsburger Allgemeine*, IG Metall leader Jörg Hofmann warned of the consequences of an economic lockdown. “Then our economic power would collapse,” he said. “But we urgently need this strength to be able to continue to afford all the welfare state measures to cushion the consequences of the crisis. Such a shutdown of the economy has long-lasting consequences... We must—as far as possible—continue industrial production, because this creates value and income for many people.”

The high-ranking union official even claimed that “infection figures are lower in production plants than in the private environment,” an assertion that would quickly vanish into thin air if the unions ensured that corporations truthfully informed their workers and the public about COVID-19 cases in the workforce and had workers systematically tested.

The interview again makes it very clear that the union leaders are in the same boat with the politicians and the capitalists—doing everything they can to keep the German economy open at the expense of working people. Any appeal to these officials is absurd.

What is needed is a political struggle against this criminal policy. The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) and the *World Socialist Web Site* call for workers to build independent action committees and unite with their colleagues around the world based on a socialist programme.



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