Vaccination debacle in Germany exacerbates spread of new variants

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Well over 100 million people have been infected with SARS-CoV-2 worldwide, and more than 2.2 million have died from it. In Germany, nearly 57,000 have fallen victim to the virus so far. One year after the outbreak of the pandemic, the situation continues to deteriorate.

The much invoked "light at the end of the tunnel," the vaccination of the population, is proving to be a real debacle. The EU and the German government have not bothered to provide the vaccine in sufficient quantities for all of Europe. Instead, they have entrusted this to private pharmaceutical companies worth billions. The vaccine manufacturers—BionTech-Pfizer, Moderna, AstraZeneca—promised huge supplies to win the lucrative EU contracts; now they cannot fulfil them at all.

The result is an increasingly open, vicious trade war at the European level. At the same time, hundreds of vaccination centres have stood empty for almost two months, while new, even more dangerous variants of the virus are spreading rapidly.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP), its youth organisation the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) and the *World Socialist Web Site* call on workers, teachers, educators, students and pupils to take matters into their own hands. A European-wide general strike must enforce a coordinated lockdown in Europe that also shuts non-essential manufacturing and service industries and closes schools and day-care centres until the pandemic is under control. The IYSSE in Germany has organised an online meeting on the issue February 1.

In doing so, the SGP, IYSSE and WSWS explicitly oppose right-wing politicians, journalists and celebrities who are now using the chaotic vaccination debacle to spread nationalism and demand the opening up of businesses and schools. In Germany, one example is the Christian Democratic district administrator Stephan Pusch from North Rhine-Westphalia, who demanded on Facebook on Friday, "In two weeks, and this is an urgent appeal, schools must reopen."

Pusch is crisis manager in Heinsberg, the first district to be severely affected by coronavirus, for which he received the Federal Cross of Merit from German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier. Later, in an interview with several media outlets, he repeated that schools and shops must finally be reopened. "Little by little, the economy must also be loosened again … There's a time bomb ticking."

Regarding the vaccination chaos, Pusch criticised the German government for wanting to order the vaccine through the European Union. "When the pandemic broke out, we saw how nations around the world fought veritable battles over the supply of protective masks. Against this backdrop, it was naïve to believe that the community of nations would share the vaccine peacefully," said Pusch, who was clearly in favour of an even stronger national solo effort.

The spread of the new virus variants from Britain, South Africa and Brazil shows the complete ineffectiveness and bankruptcy of such solo national efforts.

More and more outbreaks with the new mutation discovered in Britain are becoming known. In the meantime, there are already hundreds of cases of such mutations, and the number of unreported cases is very high, as even the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) admits. Sixty-four cases of infections with such variants have been discovered in Cologne alone, as Johannes Niessen, head of the Cologne Health Department, reported on broadcaster WDR. They were detected in four day-care centres, one refugee shelter and two hospitals.

Recently, Charité virologist Dr. Christian Drosten issued an unequivocal warning: "We're in a risky situation, you have to realise that." Speaking on broadcaster NDR's "Coronavirus Update," he explained what the consequence of a premature relaxation could be under conditions of a further spread of such mutations:

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Even if it were possible that the elderly were all vaccinated and protected (which he does not think is possible), then "we could have an extreme number of infections in a short time. In England, there were around 60,000 new infections every day."

But it could be much worse, according to Drosten. "Then we would have a situation with 100,000 to 120,000 infections a day ... These would be much younger people who would then also become seriously ill. Because we know that people without risk factors also become seriously ill and end up in intensive care."

This phenomenon can already be observed in several hospitals and day-care centres. Since the new variants spread more easily overall, more children and young people inevitably become infected with them. As a result, even children have become so seriously ill in recent days that they had to be ventilated.

"What is developing unpleasantly—it has to be said—is the situation among children," the head of Lower Saxony's crisis unit, Heiger Scholz, said a few days ago. He reported that the COVID-19 patients who had to be ventilated in his state included two children. A total of eight children with COVID-19 are in hospital in Lower Saxony.

In Hamburg-Altona, no fewer than 13 of a total of 14 educators at the Elbpiraten day-care centre have been infected with coronavirus, although it is not known with which variant. Among the children, 18 out of a total of 35 children are infected, and numerous family members are also said to have already been affected.

In Freiburg, too, a variant of the coronavirus was detected in 18 children and educators in a day-care centre. This prompted the state government under Winfried Kretschmann (Green Party) to change its plans, according to which it wanted to reopen schools as early as February 1—contrary to nationwide rules. Only a few days earlier, Kretschmann had vehemently pleaded for this opening of schools. One should not "forever pretend that primary schools and kindergartens are the problems of this pandemic. That is simply not the case."

Meanwhile, on the TV programme "Anne Will," intensive care physician Uwe Janssens warned of a "terrible third wave" if the Brazilian virus spreads. In recent days, there have already been several horrific outbreaks at hospitals in various German states.

On January 26, the Bayreuth hospital in Bavaria had to impose an admission ban and a quarantine of 3,000 staff after a new outbreak of the virus mutant B.1.1.7 was detected in a total of 99 cases. Now the hospital only admits patients who present in an absolute emergency.

Previously, the Humboldt-Klinikum in Berlin-Reinickendorf and the Medius-Klinik Nürtingen had been completely quarantined because of similar outbreaks. While the B.1.1.7 variant was also detected in Berlin, two other new mutations were discovered in Nürtingen. New outbreaks also occurred at hospitals in Lower Saxony and North Rhine-Westphalia.

In these completely sealed-off hospitals, the staff are subject to a so-called "shuttle quarantine," which places enormous additional burdens on them. They are only allowed to "shuttle" between work and home, but not to walk the streets, use public transport, or even go shopping, take the rubbish out or empty the mailbox.

"Where's the shuttle service, where's the shopping service, where's the childcare?" caregivers ask desperately under the Twitter hashtag #shuttlequarantine. One writes, "The word 'shuttle quarantine' is a savage euphemism. It should rather be 'isolation with work obligation,' and that's still the least drastic thing I can think of."

The risk of contagion is also growing in the factories. At Airbus, the British variant has been detected in a further five employees at the Hamburg plant. This means that seven of the 21 Airbus employees who have tested positive so far have been infected with this variant. The WSWS wrote about this: "The outbreak at Airbus shows once again that workers are completely on their own when it comes to the high health risks to which they are exposed. The company, the authorities and the trade unions and their works council representatives owe their allegiance to the bank accounts of the shareholders rather than the lives and health of the workforce."

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