

German federal and state leaders open the floodgates for a third wave of COVID-19

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The February 3 meeting between German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the premiers of Germany's 16 states has opened the floodgates for a third wave of COVID-19. In a few days, many schools and day-care centres in Germany will reopen. This is occurring despite the fact that new, highly contagious virus variants are spreading and neither teachers nor childcare workers have been vaccinated.

Officially, government politicians claim they have decided to extend the current (half-hearted) lockdown until March 7. Until then, certain restrictions will remain in place, and retailers, museums, massage and sports studios will reopen in March only if the seven-day incidence does not exceed 35 new infections per 100,000 inhabitants. Hairdressers, however, will be allowed to reopen as early as March 1, according to the "resolution" of the video conference held between the heads of Germany's federal and state governments February 10.

Politicians are well aware of the dangers currently posed by the virus variants. "It is the period between now and mid-March during which ... the mutated viruses can gain the upper hand over the previous virus. This period is existential," said Merkel (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) at a press conference on Tuesday evening.

This requires "considerable additional efforts to reduce infection figures," the official resolution states. Nevertheless, the same document claims: "In order to guarantee education and the future of our children and young people, **the opening up of child care and the education sector are a priority**. This area is therefore to be the first to be gradually reopened" (emphasis in original).

Following the meeting last week, Germany's state governments have been racing to open up day-care centres and schools. This comes in the face of daily infection figures averaging 8,500 last week and the fact that teachers and care workers remain unvaccinated and are likely to remain so for some time. Also relevant are the developments in Britain and Belgium, where the virus variant B.1.1.7 and the variant B.1.351 discovered in South Africa have spread rapidly in schools.

Scientists have warned of the same scenario for Germany. The leading virologist Melanie Brinkmann, who advocates a "zero-COVID" strategy, gave an interview to the *Spiegel*

magazine and concluded: "However, if we wait another four weeks [before imposing really strict measures], it will soon be like London here, with an incidence rate in the thousands and everybody shocked. The later you start heading towards zero, the more deaths we will have, and the greater the damage to the economy, society and health. And then it takes even longer." Brinkmann spoke of "180,000 people in Germany under 60 who would not live to see next spring. Children would also die."

Her colleague, Helmholtz virologist Michael Meyer-Hermann, has also warned of a devastating third wave if politicians do not tighten measures significantly. "Unfortunately, we now have two to three pandemics," Meyer-Hermann said.

Nevertheless, nearly every German state government has declared its intention to reopen schools and day-care centres as early as February 22. The Ministry of Education in North Rhine-Westphalia instructed all school headmasters in a "School-Mail" to allow all senior students to attend in-person classes on that date. "In principle, it is possible for the pupils in final year classes to resume attendance, even at full class size," the mail reads. Primary and special schools are also to resume in-person teaching.

The Saxon state government has taken an even more aggressive approach, although Saxony has the highest current infection rate in Germany. Saxony plans to reopen its schools and day-care centres as early as February 15. "We have the expectation and hope that in the districts still above 100 (incidence rate), we will get below 100 in the next two weeks," was the implausible explanation given for the reopening by state Minister of Education Christian Piwarz (CDU).

While compulsory attendance will be suspended and parents will not be forced to send their children to school, the decision means that schoolchildren from 20 or more households will sit together again in classes in the German state situated in the border zone where Poland, the Czech Republic and Germany come together, where the British virus variant is raging and spreading very rapidly.

Germany's intensive care units have been strained to their limits for months. Dr. Gernot Marx, president of the German Interdisciplinary Association for Intensive Care and Emergency

Medicine (DIVI), has warned that the situation in ICUs remains serious despite a decrease in patients with severe COVID-19. “We still don’t have a breakthrough therapy. In that respect, preventing SarsCoV2 infection through the lockdown, in combination with vaccination, is the only medically correct thing to do.”

The COVID-19 epidemic was declared a pandemic exactly one year ago. Since then, 63,000 coronavirus patients have died in Germany, and more than 2.3 million people have contracted the virus.

Many people go to work fearing for their health. The *Handelsblatt* business daily reported Wednesday that more than one in three workers (35 per cent) feared catching the disease at work or on their way to work in January. Data was collected from more than 34,000 workers by the portal *Lohnspiegel.de* from April 2020.

The biggest concerns during this period were raised—not surprisingly!—by workers in the education sector and social and medical health services where over half those polled feared becoming infected. Salespersons and geriatric nurses followed closely behind with almost 50 per cent. A third of production and manufacturing workers also constantly fear infection at work.

Germany’s political establishment has resolved to ignore science and reason and once again capitulate to the country’s business, finance and industry interests. Every business association has been demanding rapid relaxations of lockdown measures at the expense of the working class for the past year. “The retail sector is running on empty,” was how the Bavarian premier Markus Söder (Christian Social Union, CSU) tried to justify the latest decisions.

Even these concessions are not enough for many lobbyists. “Many people expected more than a fresh haircut,” argued Christian Lindner, the leader of the neo-liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP), considered the lobby of the “better-off,” in the Bundestag [German parliament]. Lindner called for the rapid opening up of all businesses. The Federal Association of Small and Medium-Sized Businesses (BVMW) also criticised the latest German government resolutions as a “peak of disappointment for small and medium-sized businesses.”

What many workers think about the latest resolutions is evident from posts in social media. In the Facebook group “Schule ohne Ansteckungsgefahr” (School without the risk of infection), for example, Verena S. wrote: “So, for many children and teachers it will soon be a case of opening windows and praying things go well despite new mutations ... The hidden spread of the virus by asymptomatic children is what led to such high numbers and the lockdown in the first place. Now we add at least 3 more dangerous variants as variables to this equation ...”

“But we also have to remove airing classrooms from the equation,” she went on. “Or do they want to open windows for 5 minutes every 20 minutes with temperatures currently at

between zero and minus 10 degrees [Celsius]? Apart from the fact that children and teachers freeze their butts off and can hardly learn as a result, cold air also means dry air, which in turn leads to dry mucous membranes that are supposed to be much more susceptible to viruses. I can already guess how this will turn out.”

Harald, a teacher in North Rhine-Westphalia, wrote to the WSWS: “The hypocrisy particularly widespread now, i.e., that pupils cut off and suffering from the lockdown need ‘normal’ in-person lessons, is ridiculous and incomprehensible. Prior to the various, far too inconsistent lockdowns, hardly anyone from the media or ruling politicians paid serious and regular attention to the low effectiveness of in-person teaching, the miserable IT infrastructure for schools and most families, or the emotional burden for pupils in completely overcrowded classrooms. What then, objectively, was so good about this kind of ‘normality’?”

Harald explains what is needed instead: “Care for the ‘socially disconnected’ is necessary now, that’s clear, and it can certainly be financed and organised: Look at the corporate profits, expropriate the banks and multinationals, put them under the control of workers in industry, administration and schools etc., form action committees and workers’ councils to this end, network worldwide in the process ... implement the lockdown consistently until your factories and schools are safe!”

The Socialist Equality Party is the only organisation fighting for this perspective, for the building of networks of action committees, for safe workplaces and schools. Only the mobilisation of the entire working class can stop the outbreak of a third, even more devastating wave of the coronavirus pandemic. As we state in the appeal of the Safe Workplaces Network: “Workers everywhere face the same problems, which can only be solved together. That is why we are organising independently of the trade unions and establishment parties and joining forces with our colleagues all over the world to prepare a general strike.”



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