

Coronavirus raging in Germany's factories

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One year after the start of the coronavirus pandemic, which has so far claimed the lives of over 65,000 people in Germany, one thing is certain: tens of thousands of people would not have had to die if there had been consistent protective measures. All the establishment political parties, federal and state governments and trade unions are responsible. This is based on a common class interest: economic interests come before health and life. This capitalist principle is applied worldwide.

Since the whole of global capitalism is based on the exploitation of labour power, it was essential for the economic and financial elite to keep workplaces open and large production plants running. Instead of shutting down factories and schools, while ensuring workers receive full compensation, governments have handed billions to the banks and corporations. This is also the reason why schools and day-care centres had to remain largely open so that working parents could be available to the companies every day.

It is therefore not surprising that there is no reporting on the spread of the pandemic inside workplaces, nor have comprehensive statistics been collected and studies written. It is not known how many thousands of workers have been infected at work or have carried the virus into factories from their infected children. Nor is anyone interested in the number of workers who have died from COVID-19.

In contrast, there are plenty of statistics on the turnover and profits of industrial enterprises. Even the hours worked have been recorded with precision. They have hardly declined despite the lockdown. For example, in the German manufacturing sector—with more than 5.5 million workers—700.9 million hours were worked in November 2020. That is almost as many as in the previous year when 723.8 million hours were worked. Turnover figures were also only slightly behind 2019.

On the backs and at the expense of the health of millions of workers, huge profits were raked in. Where this was not possible, workers were put on short-time work or corporations were provided with billions in taxpayers' money.

For the first time, an informative journalistic report on the untenable conditions in workplaces has been published. It is based on research by Report-Mainz and BuzzFeed News. Even though it only covers a few areas, it refutes the claims that workplaces are safe and have high hygiene standards.

Among other things, the journalists interviewed 70 occupational health and safety authorities across Germany about the challenges posed by the coronavirus crisis. Ninety percent of the authorities said they had approached companies about violations of the coronavirus regulations. However, they had only warned them verbally or in writing, if at all. Almost no fines were imposed, and it was even rarer that a business was closed down, although it would have been necessary. Two-thirds of the authorities complained that they lacked the staff to do so.

Only the tip of the iceberg

The concrete cases described by BuzzFeed News show that this can only be the tip of the iceberg. Under the subheading, "Nine months without masks, disinfection and spacing," Susanne T., who works together with her husband in the large warehouse of a mail-order company, speaks out.

"It was a completely absurd situation. I book and store heaps of masks, work suits, separating screens, pallets of disinfectants. And I'm not allowed to take any of that to protect myself," Susanne says. The article reports how she and her husband became scared since they are both in their 50s with parents in the high-risk group. Her husband called the regulatory authorities, wrote several emails describing conditions in detail but nothing happened.

BuzzFeed adds, "In Susanne T.'s case, it had taken nine months for the authorities to undertake an on-site inspection. But even if authorities respond more quickly to complaints, that still does not guarantee that inspectors will enforce the rules. And that they do not end up siding with the companies—as happened in Berlin, at Deutsche Bahn travel centres."

The article reveals glaring abuses at Deutsche Bahn travel centres: Insufficient plexiglass screens to protect customers and staff, workers sitting together in cramped spaces, etc. Despite massive complaints from the employees, no remedy is forthcoming.

Here is one example: "In Berlin, too, workers have turned to the competent occupational health and safety authority, the Landesamt für Arbeitsschutz, Gesundheitsschutz und technische Sicherheit. But the LAGetSi does not want to help. After carrying out a check in the Berlin travel centres, the responsible inspector wrote at the beginning of November that the screens were not optimal, but that 'due to proportionality,' it had been agreed with the employer that a larger screen would be fitted in case of relocation or wear and tear."

Dr. Wolfgang Hien, a long-time occupational safety expert, also concludes that workers are usually totally unprotected against the virus at their workplace. Especially on construction sites, in logistics, on the assembly lines of supplier companies, "conditions are really grotty," Report Mainz quotes him. "Close together. Head-to-head. Shoulder to shoulder."

Hien speaks of a parallel society. He reports several cases in which works council representatives turned to the supervisory authorities and politicians, but they did not help. "It can't be that 800 male and female staff work closely together in a cardboard box factory without anyone coming from the police, the regulatory office or the labour inspectorate."

Hien worked for several years as head of the health protection department in the federal executive of the German Trade Union Confederation and still has many contacts in workplaces, works councils and with trade union officials. However, the life-threatening conditions for workers, about which he rightly complains, are not least a product of the works councils and trade unions, which line up with the companies. They ensure that "their" company or group can continue to produce despite the coronavirus pandemic and that workers are kept quiet.

If anyone still believes that all this is unintentional, they should read the federal government's statement. Asked about the lack of occupational health and safety, the Federal Labour Ministry of Hubertus Heil (Social Democratic Party, SPD) replied, according to BuzzFeed, that a minimum

inspection quota had recently been set. “However, this will not apply until 2026 and stipulates that every company must be inspected every 20 years on average.”

Numerous coronavirus outbreaks

Despite a downward trend in incidence figures, numerous coronavirus outbreaks are also currently taking place in companies.

For example, at **Tenneco Federal-Mogul** in Burscheid the highly contagious British strain was discovered in at least eight employees, and at least another eight are infected. The health department did not shut down the plant, although this is the second time a major outbreak has occurred in the two factories with 1,700 employees. The factories produce piston rings and cylinder liners under the traditional name of Goetze. Here, too, the works council and the IG Metall trade union joined forces with the company to keep the plants open so that the car parts supplier does not have to forego its profits.

Last week, 14 workers were also infected with the coronavirus at **Volkswagen Commercial Vehicles**. At the relatively small Limmer site near Hanover, however, work was only stopped for two to three days. Nevertheless, the head of health care at VW Commercial Vehicles, Andree Hillebrecht, announced loftily: “The health of the workers is our top priority.” If that were the case, VW would have had to stop production at their major plants long ago.

A major coronavirus outbreak, in which the British strain again played a role, occurred at a **Kärcher** plant in the Schwäbisch Hall district, where at least 36 workers became infected. The company spokesperson said 19 contacts were under official quarantine and 251 other employees had been quarantined by the company.

The factory produces cleaning and gardening equipment and has 900 employees. Production continues unhindered. Here, too, it was stressed that the company has had a comprehensive safety and hygiene concept operating since the beginning of the pandemic, with distancing rules, mandatory mask-wearing, contact person management, a comprehensive ventilation model and consistent separation of shifts. The works council and IG Metall are silent here as well since they had helped to develop the supposedly safe and hygienic procedures.

And once again there were outbreaks in slaughterhouses. At the **Danish Crown** slaughterhouse in Husum, for example, 99 workers tested positive. There could be more, as not all results are available. Last Thursday, the health department had carried out PCR tests on 332 people who had recently worked on the premises of the Husum slaughterhouse. All those who tested positive were sent into domestic quarantine. However, a closure of the slaughterhouse was only ordered until February 14, for just two days, because two days fell on the weekend.

Even Danish Crown spokesman Jens Hansen had to admit the enormity of the outbreak: “There are many more people who have been infected. It is now a challenge—and we also have to say quite honestly that it is not realistic to produce on-site again next week. We need time,” he said.

Again, it is clear that workers are defenceless against the virus. The seven-day incidence of 45 in North Friesland has doubled to 94 in four days due to this outbreak alone.

The virus has been spreading particularly strongly in northern and eastern Bavaria for weeks. Incidence levels are still above 350 in some places, and as high as 1,100 on the other side of the border, in the Czech Republic. There have therefore been further outbreaks in slaughterhouses, farms and immigration centres, as well as in many homes for the elderly.

In a shared accommodation facility for asylum seekers in the district town of Tirschenreuth, a total of 44 new cases were registered. In an

immigration centre in Bamberg, 75 residents became infected. More than 160 contact persons are currently in quarantine and must stay in cramped quarters.

Also, there were several outbreaks at shipbuilders and shipyards. According to a report by broadcaster NDR 1, there was a recent outbreak at the cabin builder **EMS PreCab** in Papenburg, where 27 employees tested positive for the virus in a rapid test, 65 are still in quarantine. After a short break in operations, production will begin with reduced capacity, according to a spokesperson for Meyer Werft, for whom EMS PreCab builds cabins for cruise ships.

Workers at the **Peene shipyard** in Wolgast have been infected again and again since January, first 13, then another 14 workers tested positive last week. And they always confront the same reaction—contempt for the workers, operations to continue as if nothing had happened. The company does not even want to think about better safety precautions. It only announced cynically that it would continue to rely on the current hygiene measures and staggered shifts.

On February 6, broadcaster NDR reported a major outbreak at ice cream manufacturer **Froneri** in Osnabrück, where 210 out of 670 workers tested positive, almost a third of the workforce. In this case, the ice cream factory had no choice but to send all staff into quarantine and close the plant until February 26. A spokesperson for the Lower Saxony Ministry of Social Affairs said that the scale of the outbreak was comparable to those in slaughterhouses last year “and must be taken extremely seriously.”

Here, too, the questions arise: Who is responsible for this? Could the outbreak have been avoided?

These are only a few cases that have occurred in the last ten days. But this alone gives an idea of the role open workplaces have played and continue to play in the spread of the pandemic.

Effective countermeasures can only come from the working class itself, as this report also shows. The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) is contesting the federal elections to provide political direction to this struggle. Our election appeal states:

“The fight to contain the pandemic is developing into a class struggle, which is showing ever more clearly that the two major classes in society, the capitalist class and the working class, have irreconcilable interests. The official pandemic policy puts profits before human lives.

“We demand: The immediate shutdown of all nonessential businesses until the pandemic is under control! Full payments of wages for all workers affected as well as real assistance for the self-employed and comprehensive support for poor households! A globally coordinated vaccine campaign instead of vaccine nationalism and profiteering!”



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