German federal and state governments' plans for reopening schools threaten thousands of lives

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As the *World Socialist Web Site* warned earlier this month, Germany's federal and state governments have opened the floodgates to another devastating wave of the COVID-19 pandemic by initiating the sweeping reopening of schools and day-care centres. Unless the working class intervenes independently to close factories, offices, schools and day-care centres, hundreds of thousands of deaths loom in Germany alone in an even worse wave of the pandemic. Available data and scientific findings leave no doubt about this.

The incidence of the B.1.1.7 strain of the coronavirus has doubled within two weeks and increased more than tenfold in five weeks. According to estimates by the Robert Koch Institute (RKI), it now represents 25 percent of all infections in Germany. A similar development can also be seen with the B.1.3.5.1 strain, also known as the South Africa variant, whose infection share has risen from 0.3 to 1.3 percent within three weeks. In Bavaria, one of the three "variants of concern" (B.1.1.7, B.1.3.5.1 or P.1 from Brazil) was detected in 41.4 percent of those who tested positive in the last calendar week, according to the responsible testing laboratory.

Leading virologists and epidemiologists warn of the development of a "new epidemic," which will amplify the current death toll of more than 2,000 daily deaths in Europe and 400 deaths in Germany. Virologists Melanie Brinkmann and Christian Drosten have recently warned that far-reaching "relaxations" of protective measures this summer could lead to 100,000 new infections daily and 180,000 more deaths by the end of the year. According to calculation models, a complete lifting of restrictions would cost the lives of more than 1 million people in Germany alone.

Professor Michael Meyer-Hermann of the Helmholtz Centre for Infection Research in Braunschweig told *Tagesspiegel* last week that the world population was currently facing "at least two pandemics." Under conditions of insufficient containment measures, the more contagious variants were about to prevail over the original strain, he said. The slowdown in infections, Meyer-Hermann said, "indicates that the new variant is just taking over and initiating the third wave." It was "already in a phase of exponential growth again in Germany and the current measures are not enough to slow down this development."

Chancellor Angela Merkel was forced to acknowledge the impending mass deaths that the policies for which she is jointly responsible threaten. "We are now in the third wave," she told members of her party's parliamentary group in the Bundestag yesterday.

Yet, at the beginning of this new wave, the chancellor wants to widely open up society, allowing the virus to run free. Only a day earlier, during consultations with her Christian Democratic Union (CDU) colleagues, she had given the go-ahead for lifting the shutdown measures and called for a "strategy for opening up private contacts, schools, universities, vocational schools, restaurants, sports clubs, etc." According to Merkel, the "three reopening clusters" should be systematically implemented in "four stages." To this end, the federal chancellery was to form a "working group" with the state chancelleries of the Länder (federal states) and "work out the details."

The reopening policy is supported by all the establishment parties. The mayor of Berlin, Michael Müller (Social Democratic Party, SPD), who is also chairman of the Conference of State Premiers, told the *Stuttgarter Zeitung* that a "step-by-step plan" was in the offing, which would "do without the values 25 or 10" and would "not only be oriented towards new infections."

Instead, "important criteria for the next steps in easing" the situation, Müller said, were also a linear course of infections (i.e. non-exponential) and "a decreasing utilisation of intensive care." Such a "pandemic plan," which means the systematic infection of the population, had previously been publicly demanded by a right-wing group of professors around the Bonn virologist Hendrik Streeck. Now

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it is being implemented by the SPD-Left Party-Green state executive in Berlin.

Saxony's state Premier Michael Kretschmer, who had welcomed an angry mob from the far-right Reichsbürger and other right-wing extremists to his private property in January for a discussion on "ending the lockdown," reopened primary schools in his state earlier this month.

Since Monday, in Baden-Württemberg, primary schools have been open for alternating in-person classes and day-care centres in "regular operation."

"The overwhelming part of the economy," Minister-President Winfried Kretschmann (Greens) commented during a virtual meeting of the state branch of the CDU Economic Council, was "not affected by the measures at all at the moment." If the incidence rate was below 35, retail trade would also be reopened, he assured the group's representatives.

In Thuringia, the criminal profit-before-life policy of Minister-President Bodo Ramelow (Left Party) has led to the state being far ahead of all other federal states, with 120 new infections per 100,000 inhabitants, and having a seven-day incidence twice as high as the Germany-wide average.

In the past, Ramelow had publicly embraced the Swedish government's herd immunity policy and on Monday, sent some 70,000 primary school children back to in-person learning with full class sizes and no requirement to wear face masks. Personal attendance is possible in Thuringia up to an incidence rate of 200—a level four times higher than what was considered a Europe-wide hotspot at the beginning of the pandemic.

Representing the federal government, Family Affairs Minister Franziska Giffey described the reopening of primary schools in ten federal states, which is associated with mass contagion, as "the right thing to do, also in the interests of children and the best interests of children." Federal Education Minister Anja Karliczek (CDU) added that there was "no substitute" for a return to face-to-face teaching.

Yet the increased speed at which COVID-19 variants are spreading is already having a devastating effect in several cities and districts. For example, the seven-day incidence rate in Fürth skyrocketed from less than 35 to almost 74 within eleven days, while the proportion of the new variants rose to between 20 and 33 percent. Faced with an incidence rate of over 101, the administration of the neighbouring city of Nuremberg was forced to switch back to "emergency childcare" after one day of face-to-face teaching at half-size classes. In the small town of Bad Ems, 26 coronavirus infections were linked with a single day-care centre, where the variant had spread, and in another institution.

In Flensburg, the headmaster of the Fridtjof Nansen School published an open letter to all parents on its website, stating: "We consider the Ministry's decision to maintain classroom teaching regardless of the infection situation in Flensburg to be wrong." The Schleswig-Holstein Education Ministry reacted angrily and demanded school management "clarify" the "abbreviated or incorrect statements" which—correctly—blamed the ministry for the school reopenings.

Despite this attempted intimidation, and "after consultation with the school supervisory board," school management announced its decision to "reduce the attendance offer for those pupils who are taking part in a final examination this school year." The number of attendance hours will be halved in years 9 and 10, so that "pupils will only come to school once a week for their three examination subjects."

The Flensburg school board's courageous stance is part of the growing opposition developing among students, teachers and other workers to life-threatening in-person classes and the government's entire murderous pandemic policy. The explosion of infections with the new viral strains "shows that schools and day-care centres don't even have to start regular classes for the stuff to spread," Quintus S. writes in a popular post on Facebook. "After all, people who are positive today already got infected last week. I think without stopping work we will not get a grip on the occurrence of infections."

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) and WSWS are calling on all our readers and supporters to set up independent rank-and-file committees in their workplaces, schools and neighbourhoods to shut down schools, day-care centres and factories, with full pay and comprehensive support for all working families until the pandemic is brought under control.

To finance these vital measures, the assets of the pandemic profiteers must be expropriated and the billions gifted to the banks and corporations must be clawed back.

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