

Germany's reopening plan opens floodgates for resurgence of pandemic

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After nine hours of wrangling behind closed doors, Germany's federal and state governments reached a deal late last Wednesday evening aimed at systematically dismantling the remaining COVID-19 restrictions, despite a rise in infection rates and the pandemic continuing to rage across Europe. The plan worked out by the chancellor and minister presidents opens the floodgates for yet another round of catastrophic mass deaths.

Already in the weeks prior to the meeting, repeated outbreaks of more-infectious coronavirus variants occurred across Germany due to the continued operation of workplaces and the reopening of schools and childcare facilities. The terms of the deal finalised last week allow states and municipalities to eliminate lockdown restrictions on retail, recreational activities, and restaurants.

Over the coming four weeks, retail outlets, museums, zoos, and outdoor sports facilities will be opened first with restrictions, followed two weeks later by outdoor restaurants, theatres, cinemas, and gyms. Two weeks later, "recreational outdoor events" and "contact sport" will be permitted, allowing the areas "events, travel, and hotels" to be discussed at the next meeting of the minister presidents on March 22.

The agreement explicitly states that the reopening of clothing shops, cosmetic stores, gyms and beer gardens will be allowed up to an incidence of 100 infections per 100,000 inhabitants per week—i.e., under conditions of hundreds if not thousands of deaths per day. The paper states that there is a "chance to make possible additional openings in combination with a significant expansion of tests and a test programme linked to a better traceability of contacts...even with higher seven-day incidences of over 50 per 100,000 inhabitants."

Only if the incidence rises above 100 "for three days

in a row" will a so-called "emergency brake" take effect. But this only means a return to the restrictions that applied prior to last week's decision, which have already proven to be inadequate to prevent the spread of the B117 and B135 variants.

The immunologist Michael Meyer-Hermann told the *Tagesschau* on Wednesday that a precondition for a "sensible opening strategy" was that "contact clusters can really be fully and comprehensively traced." Currently, we are far from that goal, he added. Meyer-Hermann is a co-author of a "no COVID" strategy paper, whose signatories have warned of hundreds of thousands of deaths if wide-ranging reopenings are implemented in Germany.

The government knows full well that the decisions it took will lead in a few weeks to a new wave of infections and thousands of deaths. The Social Democrat parliamentary deputy Karl Lauterbach, who welcomed the reopening of businesses, bluntly declared on Twitter, "By early April at the latest, the incidence will be above 100." When the incidence rose above 100 in Germany for the first time between November and January, roughly 1,000 people were dying every day.

But the loss of human lives barely plays any role in the inhumane calculations of the government heads. Instead, bitter conflicts between the political representatives of the financial aristocracy are raging over how the policies of mass infections, social spending cuts, and the boosting of corporate profits can be carried out in the face of an increasingly shocked and combat-ready working class.

The financial daily *Handelsblatt* reported sharp verbal disagreements between Finance Minister Olaf Scholz (SPD) and Bavaria's Minister President Markus Söder (Christian Social Union, CSU) over the question of whether "crisis funding" for businesses should be

financed by the federal government or the states. Economy Minister Peter Altmeier (CDU) ultimately expressed his satisfaction at the “good result” of the meeting and remarked happily, “Many of the demands from the standpoint of business are being responsibly implemented.”

The profit-making machine is to be set into motion by what the agreement described as a “four-pronged strategy of vaccines, tests, contact tracing, and openings.” To this end, they intend to double the “actual number of vaccines administered per week” and “further develop the involvement of GPs.” The deal also referred to making available “very large quantities of rapid tests and self-administered tests.”

In reality, the widespread availability of rapid testing and self-tests, which the government is citing to justify its reopening agenda, is expected only in early April. Together with a shortage of test kits, infrastructure and test plans are also lacking. Chancellor Angela Merkel stated early last week at a meeting of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group that we will “certainly need the month of March to establish a comprehensive test strategy.”

The private purchasing of self-test kits, which are much less reliable compared to PCR and blood tests, will pose low-income workers in particular with a major financial burden. The discount supermarket Aldi told public broadcaster ARD that a pack of self-tests would be sold for €25. Health Minister Spahn has refused to comment on whether the federal government will cover the cost of the tests.

The Cologne-based pharmacist Thomas Preis, chair of the North Rhine Pharmacists Association, told WDR that he expects tests to cost €10 each. *Manager-Magazin*, which wrote last week of “great business with coronavirus self tests,” carried the headline, “Pharma and biotech firms from around the world can’t wait to join in the mega business opportunity.”

Germany’s vaccine campaign, which according to Merkel is the “second pillar” of the reopening plan, is caught up in a maelstrom of capitalist greed and geopolitical calculations, with the result that 10 weeks after the official launch of the vaccine drive, only 10 percent of those aged over 70 have been immunised.

As the agreement text acknowledged, “The rapid increase of the virus variants as a share of total infections in Germany is causing the number of new

infections to start increasing once again.” The experience of other countries shows how dangerous the various COVID-19 variants are.

The policy of death is endorsed by all of the major parties. Thuringia’s minister president, Bodo Ramelow of the Left Party, who has consistently rejected regional lockdown measures and praised Sweden’s so-called herd immunity policy, told the media last Wednesday evening, “I am happy that we are no longer chained to the number 35.” This was a reference to the politicians’ abandonment of a previously agreed-upon rule that no openings would be undertaken unless the seven-day incidence dropped below 35 per 100,000 inhabitants.

Earlier, Ramelow praised the “helpful army” for the best peace-time mission ever.” Referring to the total number of those infected and those who have received the vaccine, Ramelow added that “brave steps” are needed “to make possible the immunisation of the population.” This means “accepting the use of the word herd immunity.”



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