

With rising levels of infection in Germany, resistance to school openings grows

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The coronavirus plan introduced by the German federal and state governments two weeks ago envisaged a step-by-step further opening up of the country's economy and social life. Within the space of a fortnight this policy has led to an exponential rise in the number of infections and deaths, along with broad and fierce opposition from teachers, students, parents and school staff who fear a further round of mass deaths. Despite dozens of outbreaks at day-care centres and primary schools linked to the B.1.1.7 coronavirus mutant, the decision was taken to systematically open up shops and send secondary school students back to in-person classes.

The complete opening of primary schools and day-care centres has already led to a 42 percent increase in the number of active cases of illness among underage school and kindergarten children—3,190 cases last week. Since March 8, at least 16 children had to be hospitalised after contracting the coronavirus at school. The Robert Koch Institute (RKI) has been notified of 10 validated COVID-19 deaths “between 0 and 17 years of age,” eight of whom were children with previous illnesses.

The institute also notes that the number of cases of infection with the B.1.1.7 mutation demonstrates a “very steady growth rate” and “doubles approximately every 12 days.” According to recent British studies, the virus strain—which the RKI states now accounts for three-quarters of all cases in Germany—is significantly more contagious and deadly. For the period following Easter Monday, the institute predicts “case numbers above the level of Christmas” and unprecedented nationwide infection rates of around 300–350 infections per 100,000 inhabitants (incidence rate).

Virus specialist Christian Drosten of the Charité hospital in Berlin also affirmed on Tuesday that he anticipates a “drastic” situation “shortly after Easter similar to that prevailing at Christmas,” which could become particularly “risky” for the large numbers of unvaccinated persons aged 50 and over. With a 7-day average of over 25,000 new infections and up to 1,000 deaths per day, the pandemic reached a tragic peak at the end of December. Now, in the few days since the last “corona summit,” the infection (incidence) rate has already risen from 64 to 90. Yesterday the RKI reported 17,504 new infections and 227 deaths.

In a *Frankfurter Allgemeine* interview Tuesday, intensive care physician Gernot Marx called for a “new lockdown” and said that “in the second half of April” there could already be “just as many patients in intensive care units as there were in the second wave. ... There would then also be many more sick people in the 30 to 60 age group, because the infection figures will be higher in this age group, following the vaccination of older people. In addition, the British mutant [virus] is presumed to be more dangerous for younger people.”

In the face of these unmistakable indications of a “third wave” and clear warnings from medical and scientific experts, numerous schools at the beginning of the week resisted the attempts by state governments to reverse remote learning and compel hundreds of thousands of pupils to return to schools just two weeks before the Easter holidays.

The headmaster of the Georg Christoph Lichtenberg School in Ober-Ramstadt, Hesse, addressed parents in an open letter on Tuesday. With regard to the demand by the state's conservative CDU-Green coalition government to send “every school child to school for at least one or two days before the Easter holidays,” he wrote:

“For us, however, it is out of the question to increase the risk of infection and possibly exacerbate the course of the pandemic.... At our school, everything remains as it was up until the Easter holidays. It was above all you, dear parents, who encouraged us to take this alternative course of action.”

Both students and parents have overwhelmingly expressed “clear and unequivocal support for the continuation of online teaching,” the letter states, referring to surveys conducted by the school parents' council. Individual pupils from the school years 7 and 8 would be supervised in the school buildings, but only then with the parents' consent.

In North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), where secondary schools were supposed to commence in-person teaching on Monday, although teachers remain unvaccinated and mass testing facilities are completely lacking, schools and individual municipalities have also refused to comply with this policy. According to a report in the *Rheinische Post*, several school administrators in Wermelskirchen and Wipperfürth decided on their own initiative on Monday to continue remote learning.

The initiative of the schools in Hesse and NRW was

enthusiastically welcomed on social media by parents and other teachers. “I think civil servants should not be the victims of irrational decisions made by the executive,” wrote teacher Karin B., who teaches in NRW, on Facebook. “Protecting lives and health against a public danger is more important than following an irrational policy. We only have one life, and if you want to participate after the pandemic, you need not only your life, but also your health.”

Teacher Sebastian S. reminded the *World Socialist Web Site* that outbreaks are also taking place in day-care centres—infections which are being covered up by the authorities: “We had a day-care centre closure last week. A kindergarten teacher tested positive. The children in the group would have been category 1 contacts, but there was no notification, no quarantine, no tests for the children. I therefore have no confidence that the figures issued by our health department are correct. They are probably much higher.” It would be no different in schools, the teacher said.

The Bergische College also defied an order from school minister Yvonne Gebauer (Free Democratic Party), who publicly announced last week “there can be no testing for the pupils in the coming week.” Referring to the rising numbers of infections and affected classes and colleagues, the college’s headmaster Thilo Mücher said: “We remain firm: only final-year classes can prepare for exams in groups for in-person classes.” For all others, the online alternative continues to apply in order to protect teachers and students and prevent further cases.

“Pressure on the state government is growing,” the conservative paper *Die Welt* noted in a concerned report on Tuesday. “Despite clear state guidelines some schools are apparently boycotting a further return to in-person teaching.”

In fact, the widespread resistance by teachers, parents and school administrators quickly threatened to get out of hand, compelling some cities and districts to publicly criticise the return to in-person teaching. Several municipalities—including the district of Düren with an incidence value of 240—had unsuccessfully applied to the state government not to open schools any further. Düren’s district administrator Wolfgang Spelthahn (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) admitted that the request had “met with great approval and broad acceptance among the population,” but that the ministry’s rejection now had “to be accepted.”

In Dortmund, NRW’s third-largest city, opposition among teachers and parents was so pronounced that Mayor Thomas Westphal (Social Democratic Party, SPD) addressed the press on Tuesday, saying: “We firmly believe that it makes absolutely no sense to open schools at the moment.” At the same time, Westphal described school and day-care children as “the greatest risk of infection,” a fact that has been repeatedly denied by all state governments since the beginning of the pandemic.

The next day, however, Karl-Josef Laumann (CDU), NRW’s

Minister of Health, backed Education Minister Gebauer and declared at a press conference attended by state premier Armin Laschet (CDU) that school closures were out of the question if the seven-day incidence rate was below 100.

The city of Dortmund then announced that in future, “by order of the state,” in-person classes would take place. Other municipalities in North Rhine-Westphalia that had criticised the school openings—including Hagen, Bochum and Duisburg—accepted the position taken by the state government. In Bochum, infections have been detected at 29 schools.

The events in Germany’s most populous state demonstrate that the policy of herd immunity is to be systematically imposed on the population by the authorities. In the German capital Berlin, surveys of at least two district committees of educational staff earlier this week indicated that more than 80 percent of teachers and educators oppose in-person teaching until all those concerned can be offered a vaccination.

Precisely because this policy backed by intense media propaganda has been met with alarm and resistance among broad layers of workers, the reaction of the ruling class is assuming an increasingly authoritarian character.

This is evident not only in the breath-taking indifference towards human life but also in the immense criminal energy with which databases are being manipulated, outbreaks covered up and supposedly binding “limit values” raised in an arbitrary manner.

The district of Calw, for example, calculated a “revised incidence” by simply deducting “traceable” coronavirus outbreaks from the total number, thus halving the result.

Several state governments—including North Rhine-Westphalia and Brandenburg—have flouted the decision set in a summit decision by the federal and state governments to use the already devastatingly high incidence rates of 50 and 100 to open up schools and shops, respectively. Then, on Tuesday, federal Health Minister Jens Spahn poured fuel onto the fire by promptly stopping vaccination with the AstraZeneca vaccine, without linking this step to the reintroduction of other effective protective measures.

The resistance on the part of workers and youth must find an independent political expression to prevent a level of deaths far exceeding the first two waves. Independent action committees must be established, composed of—and democratically controlled by—students, teachers, parents and school staff. The pandemic can only be defeated through a European-wide school and general strike, the closure of schools and day-care centres, and the reduction of all production and services to essential levels.



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