Meeting of the Network of Rank-and-File Committees for Safe Education in Germany

Educators, students and parents discuss opposition against the reopening of schools in Germany

Florian Hasek, Tamino Dreisam
21 March 2021

While Germany's Robert Koch Institute (RKI) is warning of unprecedented coronavirus incidence levels and scientists across the board are speaking of a third wave of the pandemic, the German federal and state governments remain determined to open the schools and the economy. The Network of Rank-and-File Committees for Safe Education (Netzwerk der Aktionskomitees für sichere Bildung) met on Monday to organize the growing opposition to these policies and to discuss an independent perspective.

"We are at a critical turning point," Phillip Frisch, a teacher from North Rhine-Westphalia and writer for the *World Socialist Web Site*, noted at the beginning of his opening remarks. "Throughout Europe and around the world, governments are reopening all areas of public life. All remaining restrictions are being systematically weakened and lifted." The effects of this incipient third wave, Frisch said, are already evident in Eastern Europe: "In the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland, infection and death rates are reaching record levels. There are cases of hospitals no longer able to treat patients."

Frisch noted that the greatest danger is posed by the more contagious and deadly variants of the virus. "But it was the governments' re-opening policies that provided the fertile ground for mutants to spread so rapidly and for so many people to get sick and die from them." This policy served "the profit interests of a tiny, extremely wealthy minority of pandemic profiteers" who "were able to increase their fortunes by trillions of dollars and euro amid mass death and suffering." In Germany alone, he said, the net wealth of the ultra-rich increased by nearly €80 billion to €486 billion between March and July 2020.

Meanwhile, countless scientists and medical experts have unequivocally condemned the removal of pandemic safeguards, highlighting in particular the key role played by schools in the spread of the virus. Virologist Melanie Brinkmann, for example, expressed "horror" at the unsecured opening of schools, calling the current guidelines an "intellectual insult to everyone." The respected *BMJ* (formerly the *British Medical Journal*) recently reported that a significant number of COVID-19 patients suffering long-term repercussions are younger than 19 years old.

"School openings are supported by all the parties in the parliament," Frisch said. "The unions are providing cover for the school openings against the will of the teachers and have claimed that face-to-face teaching 'works well.'" To advance the interests of students, teachers and parents, he said, it is therefore necessary to build rank-and-file committees that are independent of unions and established parties.

That these developments are international in character was illustrated by a report from Liz Smith, founding member of the UK Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. As she reported, 10 million children and 2 million teachers were recently forced back into schools in the UK, even though the reproduction rate there is only just below one and hundreds of workers die every week. Prime Minister Boris Johnson recently made it clear that he would not tolerate another shutdown and demanded that the public accept "more deaths."

"The policy of 'herd immunity' is, at its core, about

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sacrificing the lives of the vulnerable, poor and working people to defend the profit interests of the ruling class," Smith said. Contrary to media coverage that glorifies school openings as a joyous event, "a brief review of the past 12 months" shows that school openings are in fact "the single most important factor in the transmission of the virus," she said. Scotland and Wales, which had opened schools about three weeks earlier, were now seeing the highest infection rates.

"When schools were forced to close last March 23, it was because of a mass uprising of teachers and workers who refused to send their children to school," Smith reported. "The unions did not call for any action." Johnson's subsequent attempt to reopen the schools met with mass resistance from teachers and parents but was supported by education unions. "The weekend before the return to schools, the growing anger among teachers and school employees was reflected in the attendance of 400,000 people at an NEU union rally."

But the union did not call for any sort of organized struggle. "Within seven weeks, support for the union turned into bitter hostility. When the NEU refused to heed the call for a strike at an event attended by 25,000 people on March 1, the union leadership's disdain and utter indifference to endangering the health of its members was on open display."

"The past year has proven that workers cannot fight for their basic interests without a rebellion against the Labour Party and the unions," Smith concluded. "Building a new political leadership is a matter of life and death."

Student Tamino, who is building an action committee of students in southwest Germany, spoke of the government's policy of progressive re-opening, which has already led to a rapid increase in the number of cases. "In the middle of a wave of contagion, governments are driving to resume 'normal operations' as quickly as possible in order to keep the profits of large corporations flowing. Even before the pandemic, governments were pushing through cuts in the social system, health care and education. Now the pandemic is being used by the government and corporate bosses to broaden these cuts and further increase social inequality. This is precisely why working class students are being left behind and hundreds of thousands are being pushed into poverty."

Helmut, a teacher from Berlin, reported catastrophic conditions at the schools: "We stand in class for at least two to three hours without a proper break—while we should actually let our masks dry out every 75 minutes at the latest. But that's not even feasible for our colleagues because of our additional duties." Children from working class families can often not afford to regularly buy new masks. "The planning and implementation of rapid testing is also a disaster! As a tester, I first have to test my colleagues at my school for five hours before I give my lessons. In the afternoon, I go to a day care centre to test the educators there because they don't have the chance to do it themselves at all."

Simone, a teacher from Baden-Württemberg, also reported on the unsanitary and unsafe working conditions in many schools. However, she explained that she had been active in the education union GEW for a long time and could not understand the rejection of the unions by the action committees. The GEW, she said, did not have the legal right to strike against the unsafe conditions.

This was contradicted by numerous members of the action committee. The GEW had not only led no industrial action, it had actively supported the opening of the schools, explained Martin Mauer, an educator from Dresden, who is also a candidate for the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) in the German federal elections. He recalled the five-point plan the union presented when the schools closed in December that was intended to get them open as soon as possible. The plan even fell short of the RKI's guidelines and did not include serious safeguards at all for elementary schools and day care centres.

Other members talked about how the unions Verdi and IG Metall and the other members of the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB) had also pushed unsafe working conditions onto workers. If workers want to defend their rights, they have to organize independently of the unions in action committees that unite internationally and prepare a general strike. This is shown, for example, by the WISAG workers at Frankfurt Airport, who left Verdi to pursue industrial action against their dismissals.

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