

Profits before lives: German government abandons “Easter pause”

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The ruling elite is determined to continue its “profit before lives” COVID-19 pandemic policy, which has already claimed over 75,000 lives in Germany alone, at any price. This was underscored by the decision of the federal and state governments on Wednesday to overturn the so-called “Easter pause” after just one day.

The original decision agreed by the conference of minister presidents and Chancellor Angela Merkel early on Tuesday to extend the Easter weekend by a single day was nothing more than a symbolic act. In the midst of the rapidly escalating and more lethal third wave, one extra day off work would have done nothing to curb the rapidly increasing infections, the spread of virus variants, and a new round of mass death.

Despite this, a storm of rage erupted from big business, the political establishment and media after Merkel announced the Easter pause at a press conference on Tuesday morning. Foaming at the mouth, spokesmen for the major corporations and business lobby groups made clear that they would not accept a single additional day on which assembly lines remained at a standstill and profits were not generated.

“Sudden plant shutdowns are inconceivable for an internationally connected economy,” stated the president of the Auto Industry Association (VDA), Hildegard Müller. “Paint shops and energy centres as well as many others” can “not just be shut down on command.” The president of the Association of Family-owned Businesses, Reinhold von Eben-Worlee, objected, “Who will pay for this additional loss? The slogan in the government is obviously, money grows on trees.”

Merkel apologised already the following day. There could be “no doubt” that “the idea of the so-called Easter pause was a mistake,” she asserted during an official question-and-answer session in parliament. “Effort and usefulness” must “always at least be semi-proportionate.” In this particular case, there were “far too many questions to be resolved, from the payment of wages to the loss of working hours and the situation in the plants and businesses.”

The response was jubilation from the same business

lobbyists, politicians, and media outlets who had sharply criticised the chancellor just one day earlier. “I think it’s a sign of strength when one admits to a mistake,” enthused VDA president Müller. “The fact that the Chancellor so rapidly assumed full personal responsibility deserves great respect,” stated the president of the Central Association of German Trades, Hans Peter Wollseifer.

Politicians from all parties spoke along similar lines. “Yes, it is good to admit to mistakes. That helps further democracy,” said the Green Party’s parliamentary group leader, Katrin Göring-Eckhardt. Even Alexander Gauland, the head of the right-wing extremist Alternative for Germany’s parliamentary group, celebrated Merkel’s about-face in his speech as “the day when everything changed.” Prior to that, the 16 minister presidents, including the Left Party’s Bodo Ramelow from Thuringia, apologised and endorsed the new “anti-lockdown” line.

What this means is obvious. Under conditions of an escalation of the pandemic, threatening more lives than ever before, the ruling elite is moving to end all public health restrictions. It is necessary to emerge from the “permanent cycle of lockdowns” and “open a new chapter,” stated North-Rhine Westphalia’s minister president and leader of the Christian Democrats, Armin Laschet, on Wednesday.

Tobias Hans (CDU), minister president in Saarland, announced Thursday that his state would exit the lockdown immediately after Easter. “As of 6 April, more private and public life will be possible,” he said. He specifically announced the reopening of cinemas, gyms, and outdoor restaurants. Further openings would follow after April 18.

Merkel explicitly declared her support for the reopening offensive in her government statement on Thursday. The government had “agreed a reopening plan with the minister presidents on 3 March that allows for a much greater degree of regionalisation.” She is of the opinion “that some states—I’m thinking of Saarland and Schleswig-Holstein—are using these options correctly.”

Merkel and the ruling elite know very well that this course is paving the way for a catastrophe. Leading virologists like

Melanie Brinkmann and Christian Drosten warned already in February that a further “easing” of restrictions could lead to up to 100,000 daily infections in the summer and 180,000 additional deaths among people aged under 60. The total abandonment of lockdown measures would, according to projections, cost up to 1 million lives in Germany.

The reactionary goals being pursued by the ruling elite with their murderous reopening policies are obvious. Firstly, they want to extract the massive sums spent on coronavirus emergency bailouts, which flowed overwhelmingly to the major corporations, banks, and super-rich, from the working class. An additional factor is the aggressive imposition of the geostrategic and economic interests of German and European imperialism.

In yesterday’s government statement on the European Union (EU) summit, Merkel informed the parliamentary deputies that Germany and Europe must use the current situation to increase their influence in the global competition between the major powers. “We know that Europe cannot stagnate or wallow in the crisis, but that we must rise to the challenges,” she stated. One of the issues is for “Europe to decisively enforce its digital sovereignty. It’s about speed. It’s not just about the how, but also the when.”

The production and distribution of life-saving COVID-19 vaccinations are also being subordinated to capitalist profit and the geopolitical rivalries between the major powers. “We will have to talk about how we can become more independent across Europe. That includes above all the issue of vaccine production,” said Merkel. The problem of vaccine distribution is “how much can be produced on European territory at this moment? Because we can see clearly: British production sites manufacture for the British market, the United States is not exporting.”

While the ruling elite promotes vaccine nationalism and profit-making, only a mere 4.3 percent of the population have been fully vaccinated. Additional billions of euros are not flowing to the funding of a Europe-wide coordinated vaccine campaign, but rather to rearmament and war. On Wednesday, the federal government agreed to increase military spending by a further 5 percent next year, reaching an annual budget of €49.29 billion. On Thursday, parliament approved the extension of the deployment to Afghanistan by another year.

The *World Socialist Web Site* described the pandemic one year ago as a trigger event that would rapidly intensify the political, social and economic crisis of the capitalist system. In every country, the ruling class is intensifying its push for social spending cuts, the strengthening of the domestic apparatus of state repression, and the rearmament of the military. The murderous drive to reopen everything and promote mass infections is a central component of this

policy.

Opposition to this is developing around the world. Workers are organising independent rank-and-file committees to secure safe working conditions and launch a counter-offensive against the attacks on wages and jobs that are being organised by management and the trade unions. Teachers and students are fighting the dangerous return to school. On Wednesday evening, the hashtag #GeneralStrike was the most discussed topic on Twitter for more than three hours.

The organisation of a general strike to impose a real lockdown—i.e., to close schools and all nonessential production due to their role as the main vectors for the pandemic with full financial support for workers and small businesses—requires a clear political leadership and perspective.

The Socialist Equality Party wrote a few days ago in its statement, “One year of the COVID-19 pandemic: a disaster caused by capitalism”:

The pandemic proves the necessity of the abolition of the capitalist nation-state system. It shows that the defense of the most vital interests of society is inseparable from the expropriation of the financial oligarchy and an end to private ownership of the means of production. It makes clear the urgent necessity for a scientifically-managed, rationally-organized and democratically-controlled world economy.

The fight for socialism is a global struggle for a society that prioritizes life over profit, human need over the wealth of the oligarchs and international collaboration over national conflict.

With the de facto ending of the lockdown in Germany, this perspective is more than ever a matter of life and death.



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