The working class in Germany pays the cost of the pandemic

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The coronavirus crisis does not affect everyone equally. As a trigger event, it has exacerbated the crisis of capitalism and the social inequality that accompanies it. The ruling class is pursuing a ruthless profits-before-life policy. While at the top of society, the corporations and banks enrich themselves and profit from the governments' billion-dollar bailouts, workers and their families pay for it with wage losses, job cuts, short-time working and their health and lives.

Last Wednesday, March 24, the death toll from COVID-19 in Germany exceeded the threshold of 75,000 for the first time. At the same time, the Federal Statistical Office announced that in 2020, because of the pandemic, wages fell in nominal terms for the first time since surveys began in 2007.

Gross monthly earnings, including special payments, fell by 0.7 percent in 2020 compared to the previous year. Consumer prices rose by just under 0.5 percent. Thus, employees were left with 1.1 percent less pay in real terms, as calculated by the Federal Statistical Office. Since this is the national average, the losses for those affected vary widely.

The paid weekly working hours of full-time employees fell significantly, by an average of 2.9 percent last year compared to 2019. The strongest decline was in the hospitality sector, 19.4 percent, followed by the arts, entertainment, and recreation sector with a 9 percent decline. Working hours in energy supply and the finance and insurance industries declined by only 0.4 percent each.

The lower income groups were hit particularly hard by the wage cuts. Unskilled and semi-skilled workers suffered the biggest wage losses with an average of 1.6 and 2.5 percent, respectively. The earnings of workers with managerial functions increased by an average of 0.2 percent.

The downward swings in wages in 2020 are much more severe than during the global financial and economic crisis in 2009 when nominal earnings were still up marginally by 0.2 percent and real wages fell by 0.1 percent.

Last year's negative wage growth also has an impact on pensioners. Since pension rates are based on wages over the previous year, there will be no pension increase in the West this year and only a very slight increase in the East of Germany. This is due to the fact that, more than 30 years after reunification in 1990, pensions in the former East Germany have still not been adjusted to the level in the West. In terms of wages, this gap is even wider.

Many employers are using the pandemic as an excuse to cut jobs and wages. However, the general wages' reduction is not only due to mass short-time working and job losses. The wage restraint of the trade unions has also contributed significantly to this. The IG Metall union, for example, simply suspended collective bargaining at the beginning of 2020 and is still negotiating wage cuts and mass job losses in the current round of collective bargaining.

The danger of contracting COVID-19, becoming seriously ill and dying from it, also hits workers and the poor particularly hard worldwide. In Germany, there have always been local and regional reports on this, but no comprehensive data collection or systematic findings. In the major media, such questions of social inequality and class issues have so far been largely ignored.

The connection between a person's social situation—the work, income, housing and living situation—and the risk of contracting COVID-19 has now been addressed in several reports and recent surveys.

These include a *Panorama* programme on March 3 on broadcaster ARD. According to research by broadcasters NDR and WDR and the *Süddeutscher Zeitung* paper, 14 out of 16 federal states have no information about which people are particularly frequently infected with the

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coronavirus. But, as the accompanying report states:

Those who live in the Berlin district of Neukölln face almost twice the risk of being infected with coronavirus than those in neighbouring Treptow-Köpenick. What is the reason for this? That is not known. What is striking: In Neukölln, 7,000 people live on one square kilometre, in Treptow 1,600. In Neukölln, the unemployment rate is 16 percent, in Treptow 8 percent. The differences in household income are similar: In Neukölln it is €1,825 per month, in Treptow-Köpenick €2,200. In Neukölln, 47 percent of the inhabitants have an immigration background, in Treptow only 17 percent.

On March 22, the online edition of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* reported a study in Cologne confirming that COVID-19 mainly affects people in poorer neighbourhoods:

The coronavirus belt stretches across Cologne. On the map by the Fraunhofer Institute, a blue band stretches from Chorweiler, the high-rise housing estate in the northwest, to the south-east of the megacity. It is above all the old industrial and working-class districts on the right bank of the Rhine signalled by deep blue on the scientists' graphic: Here, where more unemployed people, more housing benefit recipients and more people with an immigration background live in Mülheim, Kalk or Porz, the citizens most frequently contract COVID-19. The virus plagues the weak, and it spares the rich on the other side of the river in the prosperous west of the cathedral city.

Those who are described as "socially vulnerable" or "disadvantaged" in the media are workers with and without an immigrant background. They often work in low-paid jobs that are considered essential, such as care, cleaning, postal services, logistics, grocery stores and public transport, to name just a few occupational areas. They cannot work from home and have fewer opportunities to protect themselves from infection. Also, they often have worse and cramped living conditions due to high rents and low incomes.

The Robert Koch Institute (RKI) published a fact sheet on its study "Social differences in COVID-19 mortality during the second wave of infection in Germany" on March 16. The core statements are:

· During the second wave of infection in autumn and winter 2020/2021, COVID-19 mortality in Germany rose sharply, reaching a peak in December and January.

· According to the reports of the public health authorities, more than 42,000 people diagnosed with COVID-19 died in December and January. Of these, about 90 percent were aged 70 and older.

· The increase in COVID-19 deaths was greatest in socially disadvantaged regions of Germany—among both men and women.

· In December and January, COVID-19 mortality was about 50 to 70 percent higher in highly socially disadvantaged regions than in regions with low social disadvantage.

The RKI study is based on the reporting data on COVID-19 deaths submitted by the health authorities to the RKI. For the analysis of social differences, the reporting data at the level of the 401 districts and independent cities were linked with the "German Index of Socioeconomic Deprivation" (GISD). This index on the extent of socioeconomic deprivation considers several regional education, employment and income indicators.

The results of this study by the RKI are an indictment of the policies of the federal and state governments. At no time since the beginning of the pandemic have they even considered a proper lockdown, including all nonessential businesses, to bring the coronavirus under control. The overriding principle has always been to put economic interests above the needs of the population—profits before lives!

It is above all workers and the poor, pensioners and the sick who must pay for these policies with their health and lives. Even now, when the number of infections is soaring again, and the new strains of the virus are increasing the danger even more, the government is not prepared to protect the population through a proper lockdown. It refuses to close factories, schools and day-care centres, to compensate affected workers by paying full wages, and to provide consistent support to poorer households.

Workers must intervene in political events themselves! It is necessary to build action committees for safe workplaces and safe education in order to prepare a European-wide general strike based on a socialist programme. This is what the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) is fighting for together with its sister parties in Britain, France and Turkey. It is the only way to stop the murderous herd immunity policies of the ruling class.

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