

# German chancellor Angela Merkel: Economic interests take precedence over lives

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German Chancellor Angela Merkel's Sunday evening appearance on "Anne Will," the political talk show, confirmed that there can be no way out of the coronavirus crisis without mobilizing a broad movement of the working class.

The hour-long television programme consisted of a string of excuses, reassurances and attempts to divert blame for the current crisis to Germany's 16 different states. Television journalist Anne Will submissively delivered the appropriate cues to the chancellor, who was the only guest. In the course of the programme, Will refrained from touching the key question—which economic and social interests stood to benefit from the chancellor's pandemic policies?

At every stage of the crisis, the policies of Germany's federal and state governments have been characterised by one principle: profits take precedence over lives, economic interests are more important than the health of the population. Merkel (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) is sticking to this principle under conditions where the crisis is escalating dramatically.

Even the chancellor's closest advisers are now warning of a catastrophe. "There are very clear signals that this wave could be even worse than the first two waves," said Lothar Wieler, the president of the Robert Koch Institute (RKI), the German government agency and research institute responsible for disease control and prevention. Wieler considers an increase in new infections of up to 100,000 per day to be possible. Other forecasts predict 200,000 infections a day. That would require a hard lockdown, he said. "We had a lockdown worthy of the name in the spring of last year."

Social Democratic Party (SPD) health expert Karl Lauterbach has warned of a rise in COVID-19 deaths from the current 76,000 to more than 100,000 in the absence of immediate countermeasures. "It will not work without a sharp lockdown," Lauterbach stressed to the *Tagesspiegel* newspaper. He also criticised the fact that too little attention was paid by political circles in Berlin to the long-term consequences of the virus. This affects "up to ten per cent of those infected, i.e., currently up to 250,000 people." "The third wave is being underestimated politically and medically," he added.

For her part, Merkel was playing for time. "I'm still thinking about it"; "I have not finished thinking it through to the end"; "We'll look at it now, and then, if necessary, we'll have to

balance all the options for action"; if something doesn't happen "in the very foreseeable future," she would "have to consider how it could perhaps be regulated on a nationwide basis"—this was the mantra she repeated.

Merkel promised businesses, which have never been subject to a lockdown and can decide for themselves if they test employees or not, that she would evaluate their conduct for a few more days. If she were still not satisfied, she would contemplate revising the country's labour protection regulations.

Delivering workers like lambs to the slaughter—this is the pattern that has determined the coronavirus policy of the German government from the beginning. The government only really changed gear after it pumped hundreds of billions into big business and the financial markets. Countless workers lost their jobs and incomes, self-employed persons, artists and small businesses were ruined while stock markets recorded historic highs. Major German corporations such as Daimler, VW and BMW have paid out billions in dividends.

In order for the companies to make profits, schools and day-care centres were kept open to "enable" parents to go to work. For almost a year, the media, politicians and a few dubious academics spread the myth that children and young people could not spread the virus, although serious scientists have long since proven the opposite. The *Bild* newspaper organised a vicious smear campaign against the Charité hospital virologist Christian Drosten, who had published a study to this effect.

In the meantime, it can no longer be denied that schools and day-care centres are among the most important virus spreaders. An article in the latest issue of *Der Spiegel* magazine begins with the words: "When the history of the coronavirus pandemic is written, one of the worst omissions to go down in the annals will be what we did to children—and their parents—by failing to make schools and day-care centres secure places."

Although now "the much more contagious and dangerous mutant B.1.1.7" was sweeping the country, the *Spiegel* article continued, instead of drastically restricting contacts, especially at schools, there was a relaxation of protective measures. In fact, "the incidence of infection among children up to the age of 14 years is exploding." The number of cases has almost tripled in the past five weeks.

“The consequences of this rapid spread are already becoming apparent, some in horrific ways,” the magazine observed. “The virus is affecting some children violently due to a false reaction of their immune system... The children in turn infect their parents, who become ill, with some becoming very ill.”

This, however, has not prevented Germany’s federal and state governments from continuing to reopen schools. Merkel made a transparent attempt on the “Anne Will” show to shift responsibility onto state premiers, whom she accused of not applying the emergency shutdown brake decided on March 3. This provides for certain measures to automatically come into force again once a certain incidence value of infections is reached.

However, this is just a smokescreen. In reality, Merkel and the state premiers from all of Germany’s main parties—the Left Party’s Bodo Ramelow, the Green Party’s Winfried Kretschmann, the SPD’s Michael Müller and Malu Dreyer, the CDU’s Armin Laschet and Volker Bouffier and the Christian Social Union’s Markus Söder—all agree in principle on the need to subordinate COVID-19 policy to the interests of big business and finance. They jointly decided on this policy at the start of the pandemic and have implemented it consequently ever since.

Only a few days ago, after all, Merkel publicly apologized for the fact that in a meeting with the state premiers they had decided on *one* additional day off work over Easter in order to reduce infections. In her humiliating apology, she reversed the decision. She did not apologise to the relatives of the 76,000 coronavirus dead, nor to the teachers and nurses who have risked their lives, but to the business representatives who unleashed a storm of protest against this utterly inadequate and pathetic measure.

Merkel’s appearance on “Anne Will” is only the latest link in a long chain of events that confirm that the federal and state governments and the parties behind them are completely incapable of meeting the most elementary needs of the population.

The current vaccination debacle is also a result of their complete indifference to human lives. Experts advised of the importance of establishing sufficient production capacities at a very early stage when the first vaccines had been developed but not yet tested.

Lauterbach, who is himself an immunologist, called for the establishment of mass production as early as May 2020. His proposal was rejected. If the government had followed his proposal, Lauterbach said, it would have cost 24 billion euros [US\$28.1 billion] and the population could have been fully vaccinated by the end of April. Instead, the government, in which the SPD fills the post of finance minister, preferred to give away many times this amount to the big corporations and banks.

The failure of the ruling elites in the face of the pandemic is an international phenomenon. In France, where President Macron has ignored all warnings from experts, the seven-day

incidence has surpassed 400. In the Paris region, the capacity of intensive care units has already been exceeded. The US has the highest number of coronavirus deaths in the world at 564,000, while the UK leads in Europe with 127,000 deaths.

This huge number of largely avoidable deaths is the result of a bankrupt social system. After decades of income redistribution that has resulted in princely wealth for a tiny minority and an endless series of wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria, which has devastated entire societies, human lives are of little value in the eyes of the ruling elites.

While the electorate is told that there is no money to fund a full lockdown and provide necessary vaccines, billions are being poured into military rearmament and preparations for nuclear war.

At the very start of the pandemic the *World Socialist Web Site* warned that it would exacerbate all the contradictions of capitalist society. The Socialist Equality Party and its affiliated organisations in the International Committee of the Fourth International have undertaken the initiative of building Rank-and-File Action Committees for Safe Workplaces and Safe Education, advocating the immediate closure of all non-essential production and schools and the mobilisation for a general strike across Europe and internationally.

Opposition to the governments’ coronavirus policies is enormous. Poll after poll shows that the vast majority demand tougher protective measures or approve of the existing ones. But they find no support for their demands from the main political parties or the trade unions, all of which support the policy of opening up society in the interests of profit.

The fight against the pandemic requires an international, socialist programme that places lives above profits, human needs before the wealth of billionaires. The defence of the lives, health and incomes of the vast majority of the population necessitates the expropriation of the financial oligarchy and ending the private ownership of the means of production. It requires a scientifically guided, rationally organised and democratically controlled world economy.

The Socialist Equality Party (Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei, SGP) is contesting the federal election to build a new socialist party in the working class. We call on all readers of the WSWS: Support our electoral participation with your signature! Study the SGP programme and join the party!



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