

Increased incidence of coronavirus outbreaks at German factories and construction sites

Elisabeth Zimmermann
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For a number of weeks, doctors and scientists in Germany have been calling for a complete public lockdown to prevent a third pandemic wave and the prospect of more than 100,000 infections per day. Their appeals have been roundly rejected by both the federal and state governments.

In particular, no consideration has been given to shutting down businesses, even though the incidence of infections is increasing rapidly in companies and factories, as well as on construction sites.

The spread of the pandemic in workplaces is largely ignored in the national media and public discourse. Company management, the trade unions and their affiliated works councils are doing everything they can to keep infections secret and under wraps. On a regional level, however, local media outlets have repeatedly reported on outbreaks that endanger the lives and health of workers and their families.

On March 28, the Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland (RND) reported a sharp increase in coronavirus infections at the German Railways (Deutsche Bahn, DB). “The infection figures among DB Regio workers are currently going through the roof,” declared Ralf Damde, the managing director of the joint works council at DB Regio.

The works council has called for all railway employees with contact to customers to be vaccinated as soon as possible. The council has also requested that the company issue workers a certificate confirming they are part of critical infrastructure and should be classified in priority Group 3 for vaccination. However, in many regions vaccination of priority Group 2 has only just commenced, and there is a shortage of vaccine shots. This means many weeks could pass before vaccinations for Group 3 are possible.

According to RND, one week ago DB Regio had

confirmed 87 infections in rail transport and 44 in bus transport. With numbers rising rapidly, however, many more cases are expected. At regional bus depots in Brandenburg (Oder-Spree), which belong to DB, workers from other companies have been called to work because so many local drivers are infected. In any event it is likely that the figures given are only the tip of the iceberg.

A major outbreak of COVID-19 has occurred at the huge Tesla construction site in Grünheide near Berlin, according to a report in the *Tagesspiegel* on March 26. According to the newspaper, the number of workers infected with COVID-19 has risen to between 80 and 100. Around 1,000 people work on the site. On March 22, there were reports of just 20 infected and 40 employees under quarantine.

Local authorities and Tesla have refrained from providing any information about the extent of the outbreak, leading to speculation that the number of those infected could be much higher.

When asked, the Brandenburg Health Minister, Ursula Nonnenmacher of the Green Party, replied that the Oder-Spree district was responsible for “local outbreaks.” The district announced that the outbreak at the Tesla construction site was of a “double-digit magnitude.” The health department declared it was in close contact with the company and saw no reason to intervene.

The subservience on the part of the authorities to Tesla CEO Elon Musk, one of the richest and most ruthless entrepreneurs in the world, was also expressed in their response to questions from the press. “Please understand that with regard to a private company we cannot go into the details of how infections arose, the company’s hygiene concept and its implementation.”

Despite the outbreak at the construction site and

many other issues, Tesla plans to have its first vehicles rolling off the production line in Grünheide in July 2021—whatever it takes. At the moment a large contingent of engineers and fitters from a company in Poland are working on the construction site, carrying out key electrical work.

Just over 10 months ago, Musk insisted on the reopening of his Tesla plant in Fremont, California, even though state guidelines called for factories to be closed at the end of May due to the pandemic. Workers there were forced to risk their health at work or lose their jobs.

For months, Tesla, local and California authorities claimed there had been no coronavirus infections at the Fremont plant after its reopening. In fact, it is now clear that up to 440 workers were infected with COVID-19 between May and December 2020. Figures on the severity of the cases and/or possible deaths have still not been published.

At the Meyer shipyard in Papenburg, Lower Saxony, 214 workers have been infected with coronavirus. Forty-nine are part of the permanent workforce; the rest are employed by six subcontractors. As is almost always the case in this sector, they work under difficult conditions with low wages and are crowded into collective accommodations. All of these conditions are conducive to the spread of COVID-19.

Due to the infections, the shipyard, which builds cruise ships, was due to start a two-week break from March 29, with the workforce receiving short-time working payments. Each day, 2,600 tests were planned for the workforce, and the two-week break was to be used to improve infection control at the shipyard and reduce the very high incidence rate of infections of over 500 (per 1,000 inhabitants) in Papenburg. A night-time curfew has been in place since March 20 due to the high rate of infection.

Shortly after being announced, however, the planned break in operations was once again cancelled. Instead, work at the yard is to continue with half of the workforce, who are to be tested two to three times a week at a test centre on the shipyard premises. The Meyer shipyard agreed to the work continuation with the district of Emsland and the local health authority.

At the Lürssen shipyard in Bremen, more than 100 workers from various subcontractors have also been infected with coronavirus. The Bremen health authority

has had more than 1,000 workers tested. Almost all of the cases detected are the more contagious British variant of the virus. Nevertheless, operations are also continuing at this shipyard.

Workers have also tested positive at the DM drug store logistics centre in Weilerswist in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia. In the middle of last week, a total of 94 positive cases had been confirmed. All of the cases involved the British virus mutant, and 800 employees have been sent into quarantine.

This is the second major outbreak at DM in Weilerswist within a short period of time. Nevertheless, the authorities claim they have investigated the latest outbreak and found that the company has maintained “all hygiene standards in an exemplary manner.”

These cases reflect only a small percentage of those affected by the pandemic in German industries and companies. They make clear that nothing of substance is being done by the government, trade unions and local authorities to protect workers.



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