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

Workers and youth in Germany demand general strike for a “strict lockdown”

Florian Hasek, Tamino Dreisam
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Despite the devastating spread of the “third wave” of the coronavirus pandemic, all European governments are pursuing the deadly policy of reopening schools and the economy. The Network of Rank-and-File Committees for Safe Education (Netzwerk der Aktionkomittees für Sichere Bildung) met on Monday of last week to organize resistance to these policies.

“We are faced with the necessity of imposing a serious, Europe-wide lockdown that includes schools, daycare centers and industry,” Gregor Kahl, Bundestag candidate for the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP, Socialist Equality Party in Germany), said at the beginning of his remarks opening the meeting. “Insofar as this is not done, hundreds of thousands of lives will be at stake in Germany and Europe.”

Nevertheless, governments continue opening schools and the economy. “Under conditions where the pandemic is escalating and more lives are threatened than ever before, the ruling class is moving to end all protective measures against coronavirus. The bourgeoisie has decided to let the virus spread.”

But resistance to this “profits before lives” policy is becoming increasingly pronounced, Kahl added. “The pandemic is developing more and more into an open class struggle of the international working class against the ruling capitalists in every country. The first lockdowns were imposed by the independent and courageous intervention of workers in Italy, Canada, France and the U.S., making it ever clearer to the those in power that they can’t just do nothing without risking their own necks.”

Kahl pointed to recent figures from the *ZDF* political barometer, according to which 36 percent of respondents said the “current Covid measures” were “not tough enough,” an increase of 18 percentage points compared to the previous month. At no point was there a majority in favor of easing these measures, pollsters report.

This opposition, and the growing class struggles around the world, reveal the fundamentally opposed interests of the capitalist class and the working class, which find expression in the capitalist and socialist programs: “The capitalist program declares that pandemic policy must be guided by profit interests. The socialist program argues that health policy must be guided by science.”

The same contradiction is expressed in the faltering vaccination campaign. “The vaccination program must be wrested from the anarchic and destructive profit motive and be pursued scientifically.” Vaccinating “into a spreading pandemic” without a lockdown to stop the spread of COVID-19, Kahl said, is “a recipe for increased evolutionary pressure and the potential emergence of vaccine-resistant mutants.”

Regarding the policy of reopening schools, it follows from the capitalist program that schools should be reopened and the lie spread that the risk to students and teachers is low. The socialist program, on the other hand, demands “full income compensation for workers and small businesses for the duration of the crisis, paid for by expropriating the pandemic profiteers and big capitalists and transforming the banks into public institutions under working-class control.”

The international character of these developments was illustrated by the contribution of Jordan Shilton, a member of the Socialist Equality Party in Canada and of the newly formed Cross-Canada Educators’ Rank-and-File Safety Committee. The Canada-wide network of teachers and educators was developed in the course of a struggle against the unions’ decades-long attempt to divide educators in Canada along provincial and territorial lines and keep them in the dark about events in other parts of the country.

“Despite studies from Canada and around the world showing that schools are important vectors for the

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transmission of COVID-19, governments of all major parties continue to keep schools open with cover from the unions," Shilton said. Quoting from the network's founding appeal, he said, "At every point in the pandemic, Canada's governments have prioritized the selfish class interests of the capitalist elite over saving working people's lives." These are international questions, he said: "The situation of educators and teachers in Canada resembles that of workers around the world. Whether in Brazil, Germany, France or the US, teachers are being sent to the front lines in the midst of the pandemic under the most dangerous conditions. Because the pandemic is global in character, it can only be fought by the working class internationally."

Following the introductory remarks, a lively discussion developed among the students, workers and teachers in attendance. Florian, a high school student from Baden-Württemberg, referred to the devastating role of 'vaccination nationalism' and linked it to the tensions between Europe, the US and China that have been heightened by the pandemic. Even within the EU, there are "fierce national tensions," he noted: "Countries like Hungary have ordered vaccines from Russia and China, which the EU strictly rejects because it undermines its confrontational course against these countries."

The threat of war between the US and China—where comprehensive measures have led to a decline in the pandemic—is further exacerbated by the Biden administration's anti-Chinese agitation, Florian noted. "The aggressive US actions against China, however, put the German bourgeoisie between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, China is a very fast-growing market for many German companies; on the other hand, the US remains Germany's largest export market, the most important destination for foreign direct investment." Germany is countering this quandary with a massive military buildup to better assert its own geostrategic interests, he said.

Madeleine, who suffered a family death from COVID-19 due to the criminal policies of the federal and state governments, spoke about the need to "turn the tables" with a joint strike: "We all need to stick together and strike to take control for the good of our health! We should all just stay home for 14 days."

International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) member Clemens pointed out that an international strike movement is already developing. Quoting from a statement of solidarity sent by the Network of Rank-and-File Safety Committees to the German WISAG union on strike in Frankfurt, he concluded: "The WISAG workers are not alone: Resistance is forming internationally. Workers in France, Spain, Great Britain and Italy are on strike, as are teachers in Chicago and Sao Paulo. To lead this struggle to victory, we must organize independently of the unions and build the Socialist Equality Party and its sister parties around the world."

Philipp Frisch, a teacher from North Rhine-Westphalia and SGP member, reported on the growing resistance of teachers to the "profits before lives" policy. At his own school, he said, this was among other things evidenced by collective sick-outs. But this only raised the question of organization, he noted. Only independent rank-and-file committees are "willing or able to facilitate international cooperation between teachers and broader sections of the working class."

Amid the vaccination and testing debacle, Frisch continued, the brutal character of the reopening policy was becoming increasingly apparent. The government's "ostensible 'zigzagging' course" results from "attempts to preserve the interests of the financial elite in the face of overwhelming popular opposition," he said. "The rulers in all countries realize that they are sitting on a powder keg and that there is massive opposition to their policies."

Eylem, a former cab driver from Hamburg, stressed that a pandemic can only be fought internationally. "In Turkey, 13 percent of all tests are currently positive. This is a veritable tsunami of infections that just keeps spreading, and all because workers are being forced into factories. Many German car companies are supplied by companies in Macedonia and Serbia. As long as plants keep running here [in Germany], they'll try to keep plants open in those countries, too."

Tamino, a student from Baden-Württemberg, concluded by speaking about the relationship between social issues and the governments' COVID-19 policy. He said that the reopening policy only serves the interests of banks and large corporations, as was most recently shown by the jubilation of Big Finance over the rollback of a planned "Easter lockdown" in Germany. "Workers are being forced back to work in deadly conditions and are at the same time facing mass layoffs and wage cuts." This inhumane correlation, he said, is most poignantly illustrated by the tandem rise in COVID-19 death tolls and DAX share values.

Our next online meeting will take place Monday, April 12 at 7:30 p.m. (German time) in conjunction with the Rank-and-File Committees for Safe Workplaces network. Join the Facebook event *and register* here *to build action committees at your schools, institutions and workplaces.*

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