

Rank-and-File Committees for Safe Education and Workplaces

Workers and students in Germany organize successful online meeting to oppose government policy of herd immunity

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Despite the weekly incidence of COVID-19 cases per 100,000 inhabitants increasing by almost 40 points in the last week, the German ruling class is continuing to pursue its deadly policy of reopening schools and the economy. To organize resistance against this and discuss common perspectives, the Rank-and-File Committee for Safe Education and the Rank-and-File Committee for Safe Workplaces held a joint meeting on April 12.

In recent weeks, staff of intensive care units have issued urgent calls for a “strict lockdown” in the face of exponentially rising infection rates. Amid 80,000 COVID-19 deaths in Germany, leading virologists had accused politicians of “intentional contagion” and “hostility to science,” as well as of spreading “disinformation” in the media. As virologist Melanie Brinkmann warned earlier this year, the lives of up to 180,000 people under the age of 65 are at stake.

In this explosive situation, the prospect of an independent and internationally coordinated intervention by millions of people against the capitalist politics of death is finding strong resonance.

“The mood is at zero,” reported Mehmet, a worker from the Outokumpu steel company. “While the stock price has benefited from the collapse of production in Asia, the management continues to cut staff and increase the workload.” At the same time, he said, workers are being forced to continue working under deadly conditions. “One colleague has already died, and many more have become infected and have not recovered to this day.”

A special coronavirus bonus of €300 was recently disbursed by the company but only to members of the IG Metall union. “For working at risk of death, IG Metall members get €300. That is outright inhumane,” said Mehmet.

Dietmar Gaisenkersting, candidate for the Bundestag for the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei, (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, took up these issues. “While the coffins are piling up in the mortuaries, an orgy of enrichment is taking place on the stock exchanges. The fortunes of billionaires have risen by 60 percent worldwide. That’s \$5 trillion, or 1.3 times Germany’s GDP. This orgy of enrichment is taking place at the expense of workers, who have to pay for it through wage cuts, job losses and social cuts—or even with their lives.”

“The whole thing has been going on for ages,” noted Habip, a former ramp worker for the WISAG Group, which employs ground crew staff at the Frankfurt Airport. “It’s high time we did something about it.” Habip, along with hundreds of colleagues, turned their backs on the Verdi union last winter and participated in struggles against the WISAG Group’s policy of layoffs and wage theft.

“The ground workers fighting their dismissal at Frankfurt Airport with protests and a hunger strike speak for millions of workers around the world,” Gaisenkersting said. He added, “The pandemic shows the true face of capitalism. It destroys the illusion that it is possible to reconcile the opposition between the classes, that the interests of the financial oligarchy and the working class can somehow be reconciled. The unions, as co-managers, are ensuring that workers, teachers and employees are forced to continue working despite the danger of infection and are drawing up comprehensive plans for wage cuts and job losses.”

Tamino, a senior in high school, reported that the situation in schools is similarly threatening. “Here in Baden-Württemberg, about two-thirds of all grades currently have to attend in-person classes. These are conditions under which even simple protective measures such as social distancing are no longer possible.” And this is not to speak of protection against transmission by aerosols.

“We had a single ‘lockdown’ in March, and that was for two weeks,” reported Meret, who is about to graduate from a high school in Bremen. “Otherwise, the schools were open continuously.” Meanwhile, several classmates have become infected with the coronavirus mutant B.1.1.7, she said. They had to be quarantined for weeks. This, Meret said, has also put the students’ relatives at risk and jeopardizes students getting their diplomas.

To keep exams on schedule, the school switched to distance learning in recent weeks, “but there are many students who cannot participate in exam preparation this way because they lack the necessary technology.” The increased pressure on students, she said, has led to many dropping out of high school. “That schools are being opened in the name of the students, I find particularly repugnant,” Meret said, because openings were “only cover to

pursue very clear economic interests. ... The idea of a general strike and an international strike is exactly what we need," she concluded.

Other participants emphasized the international significance of the meeting. Florian, another student from Baden-Württemberg, highlighted the increasing "vaccination nationalism" of the ruling class. This, he said, was most recently evident in the veritable vaccine trade war between EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and the Johnson administration in the UK over the supply of 21 million doses of vaccines. He also said the Biden administration is using the vaccine campaign to stoke nationalism, while stepping up war preparations against China and Russia.

"The profit interests of individual capitalists prevent a purposeful and democratic distribution of the vaccine," Florian noted. "The Southern Hemisphere has yet to receive virtually any vaccine. In India, where 40 percent of new daily infections are currently reported, only 0.8 percent of people are fully vaccinated. Export bans and patent restrictions make vaccine distribution even worse."

Meanwhile, Florian said, all major powers are gearing up for new wars, including, first and foremost, the US under Joe Biden, which is seeking deployment of more nuclear missiles off the coast of Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. "Against the unjust distribution of the vaccine, rising nationalism and the threat of a third world war, only the international working class can act by breaking with capitalism and transforming society according to socialist principles."

The international perspective of the meeting was most clearly expressed in the report of Thomas Scripps, deputy leader of the Socialist Equality Party in Britain, who also heads the work of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) there.

Despite the fact that 150,000 people have already lost their lives to COVID-19 in the UK and that infection rates have only recently begun to drop, the UK Tory government is driving a brutal reopening campaign. "Johnson claims that ending public health restrictions is justified by the UK's vaccination programme. But this is a lie. Only 10 percent of the population has received their second required dose. Especially in poorer areas, the vaccine has not reached large sections of the vulnerable population."

As Scripps reported, the British government, like the German government, has handed trillions of pounds of taxpayer money to the corporations and the superrich under the guise of "bailouts" that are now being squeezed back out of the working class.

"One in 10 workers has faced a 'fire and rehire' scheme, where the employers threaten to sack workers if they do not sign an inferior work contract. The trade unions signed off on the bailout of the corporations and the furloughing of workers with a 20 percent wage cut, leaving millions more without incomes. Teaching unions are playing an especially criminal role in allowing schools to stay open even as cases surged."

The most urgent task for workers, he said, is therefore to fight for their own program. "The working class must take control of society's wealth and productive resources and use them to defend every life and livelihood." Classroom attendance and nonessential production must be stopped while social protection is provided

until the pandemic is under control, Scripps explained.

"The public health system must be expanded, and trillions must be allocated for a truly global vaccination program. But once workers start fighting for these demands, they will find that in doing so they are immediately confronted by unions that oppose such a program. They therefore need their own independent rank-and-file committees, which they democratically control—and a revolutionary socialist party to lead these struggles."

In her contribution, participant Madeleine from Cottbus made clear the difficulties that millions of working families are facing. "We don't know where the journey is going and are forced to just function."

In addition to continuous stress at work and worries about income and employment, there is the extra work associated with digital instruction of school-aged children at home and the threat of mutated coronaviruses at school. Students who attend classes from home under difficult conditions are under particular pressure, she said. "The government's actions seem to me incomprehensible and completely wrong. Actually, we should shut everything down for four to eight weeks and go on strike."

Joshua, a student, answered the question about the seemingly irrational government policy and its relation to the profit interests of the ruling class and its state. "That is a principle of capitalism. It is designed to ensure that the means of production are owned by a few. By exploiting workers, the entire economy ultimately serves to generate profit for that minority at the expense of the majority." This was further exacerbated in the pandemic, he said. "In a system that was focused on the needs of the population, everything would have been done to stop the spread of the virus."

Christoph Vandreier, the SGP's top candidate for the federal elections, spoke at the beginning and end of the meeting about the importance of a socialist perspective in the fight against the pandemic policy. "A year of the pandemic has made clear that capitalism is bankrupt and incompatible with the basic needs of workers," he said. "This is why ruling classes all over the world are once again turning to fascism and dictatorship to impose their policies upon the majority of the population."

"In order to solve the social problems and fight the pandemic, the big banks and corporations must be expropriated and put under the democratic control of the population. Only on the basis of an international, rational and democratically planned economy can the necessary measures be taken and an effective vaccination program implemented. Such an international and socialist program is what the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei fights for in the upcoming federal elections."

Online meetings of the Network of Rank-and-File Committees for Safe Education are held every other Monday at 7:30 p.m. Join our Facebook group and register here to build action committees at your schools and institutions.



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