

German factories and low-income neighbourhoods left exposed to massive COVID-19 outbreaks

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People are getting infected by COVID-19 at especially high rates in workplaces, schools and low-income neighbourhoods in Germany. Several studies and examples testify to this. Nonetheless, they receive virtually no protection and are largely excluded from lockdown measures. This also applies to the recently adopted “federal emergency brake.”

For workplaces in particular, there are almost no protective measures and the few that exist are never reviewed and enforced. The number of workplace safety inspections declined during the first year of the pandemic by 15 percent. Factories must remain open so profits continue to flow, even if this means that workers’ health and lives are put at risk.

The publicly funded media, big business and the trade unions are doing everything in their power to downplay the danger. Even directly affected work colleagues are often never informed about outbreaks in workplaces. Reports are usually restricted to the local media when larger outbreaks occur. Here are two typical examples:

At the kitchen furniture producer Menke-Küchen in Kirchlingen (North Rhine-Westphalia) around 20 workers have been infected, according to the head of the business, Hans-Dieter Menke. This was reported by the *Neue Westfälische Zeitung* on April 29. The first case was detected on the assembly line one week earlier. Tests by the local health authority then revealed that 20 workers, or one in six of the total workforce of 120, were infected. All of those infected and their contacts were sent into quarantine.

An even larger outbreak occurred at the Brüggén vehicle plant in Lübtheen (Ludwigslust-Parchim district, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania). Almost 200 of the workers, who build truck parts, tested positive. Most of them displayed COVID-19 symptoms. The outbreak is one of the largest to take place at a workplace in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. Infections spread exponentially among the production workers. Responsibility for this lies with the British variant of the virus, B.1.1.7, according to local medical officer Ute Siering. The incidence rose in the district to 227 per 100,000 inhabitants.

Five hundred workers, almost all from the production department, were sent into quarantine. This amounts to half of the 1,000 workers employed at the site and more than 10 percent of the entire population of Lübtheen, which has 4,900 residents. A residential block near to the factory where many workers live was

placed under quarantine. The production hall was closed last Friday for two weeks. Departments of the business separated from the production hall are continuing to operate.

These two examples are the tip of the iceberg of countless outbreaks in factories, businesses and other workplaces.

No lockdown for big business

The *Monitor* newsmagazine on public broadcaster ARD reported on its April 29 edition that businesses have been all but excluded from coronavirus protective measures.

The introduction to the segment declares, “Whether in the construction, meat processing, or auto industries, politicians seem not to take the issue of enforcing protective measures particularly seriously. Those who suffer the most as a result are people in precarious jobs; such as cleaners or harvest workers, who are often exposed to the risk of infection without any protection.”

Several examples were provided from the construction industry, which has been excluded from lockdown measures in spite of the high risk of transmission. Even a limited slowdown of operations was dismissed out of hand by the political establishment, as the programme noted:

“We have a series of sectors that are effectively not impacted at all by protective measures. For example, the auto industry, machine manufacturing and various service jobs, where people are going to work as before, and can get infected on their way to work or at their workplace.”

Workers employed precariously are hit hardest of all. A woman who has worked as a cleaner for years told *Monitor*, “My boss doesn’t bother doing anything. No disinfectant, no masks, no tests.” She spoke anonymously because she feared being let go if she protested openly.

The modest restrictions and hygiene plans that apply to companies are hardly enforced at all. Figures gathered by Germany’s states obtained exclusively by *Monitor* showed that workplace safety inspections by the authorities during the pandemic actually declined. In 2020, the number of inspections carried out in workplaces fell by 15 percent compared to a year

earlier.

The obligation to work from home if possible is not being monitored, and companies who ignore the order are never sanctioned. An investigation by several scientific institutions from last week revealed the number of high-risk contacts of people who work in offices. Twenty-one percent have unprotected contact with more than six people, with one-third of those having contact with more than 11 people. A contact is considered unprotected if they are in the same room as someone without a mask for at least 15 minutes. All of these contacts would be avoidable if the obligation to work from home was strictly enforced.

Following a request for information by *Monitor*, 14 of the 16 states revealed that despite numerous violations of hygiene regulations and the requirement for employees to work from home, not a single fine has been imposed.

It is also noteworthy that the number of inspections in workplaces declined from 61,864 in 2019 to 50,366 in 2020, which equates to a 15 percent drop. This decline took place from an already low level. Figures from 2018 show that, on average, workplaces in Germany are inspected once every 25 years for workplace protection, with this only taking place every 40 years in some states.

The recently adopted Workplace Protection Control Act proposes that 5 percent of all businesses in a state be inspected by the relevant authorities every year. But this rate only applies from 2026!

High infection rates in low-income neighbourhoods

The coronavirus pandemic is acting as an accelerant to the contradictions of the capitalist system. Social inequality in particular has risen dramatically. The rich and super-rich, banks and major corporations have enriched themselves to unheard of degrees thanks to state-sponsored “bailouts” and rising share prices on the stock exchanges. Meanwhile, workers and their families bear the brunt of the pandemic’s social consequences.

This social polarisation is clearly expressed in infection rates. New studies and investigations demonstrate that in large cities, incidences are much higher in low-income neighbourhoods, while more prosperous districts have low infection rates and sometimes no infections at all.

In Cologne, where the incidence rose to 230, the infection rate varies sharply between different neighbourhoods. In Libur and Gremberghoven, the incidence was over 700 for a time, and it was over 600 in Neubrück. In the low-income district of Chorweiler, where almost 13,000 people live at close quarters, the incidence was over 500. Since the beginning of the pandemic, 963 people have been infected there. In the villa district of Hahnwald, by contrast, not a single infection has been recently reported.

The relationship between poverty, precarious employment, unemployment, cramped living quarters and the risk of being sickened by COVID-19 is obvious.

A disproportionate number of COVID-19 patients in intensive

care come from poor neighbourhoods or immigrant families. Intensive care medics have pointed to the social relations to explain this phenomenon: poverty, insecure working relations, cramped apartments, which make it impossible for people to follow social distancing and thus protect themselves. When one person in a family gets sick, all other family members normally get infected. A disproportionate number of people in these families then die from COVID-19.

The intensive care units in Cologne’s hospitals are currently so full that several patients have already been transferred to far-off hospitals.

The number of infected school-aged and kindergarten children was also recently higher than at any time before. The city of Cologne recorded 874 active cases among this cohort. In addition, there were 186 infections among teaching staff and carers. At the beginning of April, the seven-day infection rate among children and young people aged between seven and 19 was 180. Over subsequent weeks, it rose above 400. The share of children as a percentage of total infections also changed. At the end of the Easter holidays, 15 percent of cases were among people aged 20 or younger. It has now risen to 25 percent.

Cologne is not the exception. Similar figures can be cited from almost every large city in Germany.

In Duisburg, the incidence was above 450 during the week of April 19–25 in five neighbourhoods. Many of the areas affected are in the north of the city, including Bruckhausen with 518 and Beeckerwerth with 428. Both neighbourhoods are close to the ThyssenKrupp steel plant. Many steelworkers, retired steelworkers and their families live there. Several neighbourhoods in the Rheinhausen district also recorded high incidences, including Hochemmerich with 469 and Rheinhausen-Mitte with 465. In the South district, the neighbourhood Wedau has an incidence of just 20, while Hüttenheim recorded 375.

The districts Hamborn and Meiderich/Beeck in the north of Duisburg reported almost twice as many infections between November 2020 and the beginning of April 2021 as districts in the south and centre of the city.

Over 26,000 people have been infected by COVID-19 in Duisburg; 612 people have died. In April alone, 60 people fell victim to COVID-19. According to the latest data from the Duisburg local health authority, those who died were much younger than those who died between October and March. Over 100 people are currently being treated for COVID-19 in hospital, including 46 in intensive care.

These figures underscore the extremely high price paid by workers and the poor for the coronavirus pandemic. In addition, they are affected most of all by job cuts, wage reductions and poor working conditions. Many companies have exploited the pandemic, with the assistance of the trade unions, to attack wages and working conditions.



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