

German state governments reopen as COVID-19 infections remain high

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14 May 2021

On Monday, the coronavirus cabinet, led by German Health Minister Jens Spahn, rolled back restrictions on those who have been vaccinated or have recovered from COVID-19. With this reckless action, the German ruling class has flung the door wide open, endangering countless thousands of lives.

Since the action on Monday, Germany's 16 state governments have been racing to see who can dismantle all the remaining public health measures first. The tourism, restaurant and retail sectors are opening once again, as well as all schools and childcare facilities. "Everything is going in the right direction," enthused Spahn at his weekly press conference on Wednesday.

These policies have absolutely nothing to do with a scientific approach to the pandemic. They are instead dictated by the needs of the profit system. Moreover, they are extremely risky. Even though the incidence rate has been declining in Germany for some time, the coronavirus pandemic is a long way from being under control.

Thus far, just under 10 percent of the population has been fully vaccinated. Almost five months after the beginning of the inoculation campaign, only one third of the population has received a single dose. No vaccine has been approved in Europe for children aged 15 and under. Ten million people considered high risk or prioritised due to their profession have yet to even receive a vaccine appointment, as the head of the Permanent Vaccine Commission (StIKo) noted with concern.

This was why the virologist Melanie Brinkmann (Technical University Braunschweig) warned, "We're dancing on the rim of a volcano." For months, she has been urging the government to accelerate the pace of vaccinations. She sees the reopening policy as carrying "a big risk."

Her colleague, Michael Meyer-Hermann (Helmholtz Centre for Infection Research) said it was "cynical" how the politicians are selling the stabilisation of the pandemic at a high rate of infection as a success. "It's a major failure," remarked the immunologist.

Hundreds of coronavirus patients continue to die every day. On Wednesday, the toll was 283, about the number of people who might die in a commercial plane crash. Younger people are increasingly falling victim to the virus. The Robert Koch Institute (RKI) has recorded 19 deaths of people aged under 20, 12 of whom were children under the age of 10. When unreported cases are included, the true figure is probably much higher.

According to a new and alarming study by a Washington State-based institute, the number of global coronavirus deaths is much higher than previously reported. The study estimates the number of worldwide COVID-19 deaths at 6.93 million, more than twice the officially reported figure. The Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation came to this conclusion on the basis of an analysis of excess mortality figures.

According to this study, more than 120,000 people have already died from COVID-19 in Germany, close to 50 percent more than the official death toll. This would be the equivalent of eliminating, in the space of 14 months, a mid-sized city such as Wolfsburg or Heilbronn.

The Federal Statistics Agency in Wiesbaden did not respond to a request from this author for comment on the death toll. The RKI had registered 85,481 deaths by the end of Wednesday. There are currently 251,400 active coronavirus patients in Germany, of whom 4,461 are in critical condition in intensive care.

The number of young people in this latter category is increasing. "The patients get younger and younger, have to stay in hospital longer, and spend more time in intensive care," Dr. Med. Heike Schlegel-Höfner, head of hospitals in Ilm district in the state of Thuringia, told Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk (MDR). In the report "Conditions in the ICUs," she refers to more serious illnesses and elevated death rates.

The dominant variant in Germany, B.1.1.7, is highly aggressive, and almost every ICU patient requires a ventilator. "The mutations are leading to worse illnesses," Heike Schlegel-Höfner said. "The lung damage suffered by patients continues to get worse. Almost every patient in

intensive care requires a ventilator, and for a longer period of time.”

In the Ruhr region, the *Recklinghäuser Zeitung* reported on the youngest COVID-19 patient in intensive care at the Prosper Hospital: a 23-year-old who required oxygen until recently. The newspaper cited the head doctor as saying, “As a young person, one is not free from the risk of serious illness due to COVID-19.”

Speaking of the most recent reopening policies, he added that there would be no swift return to normalcy because “a pandemic can only be combatted globally.” He added, “As long as people in Africa or Asia are not vaccinated and hundreds of thousands continue getting infected, there will continue to be mutations. And at some point, another catastrophe will find its way to Europe.”

This is precisely the danger bound up with the latest round of reopenings.

Politicians justify the reopening measures by claiming that the incidence rate is declining. The average seven-day incidence rate is about 100 infections per 100,000 inhabitants. On Wednesday, the nationwide incidence in Germany was 107.8.

But this provides no grounds for comfort. If one examines the data more closely, which the media refuse to do, a clear difference in incidence rates according to age group becomes apparent. The incidence rate among people aged 60 to 79 is 67 per 100,000 inhabitants, and 47 for those over 80. This shows that the prioritisation of the elderly for vaccinations is having a positive impact.

By contrast, the incidence rates for children and young people, together with their parents, are worryingly high. According to RKI figures from 11 May, the incidence rate among children aged 5 to 9 is 148 per 100,000 inhabitants, 167 for those aged 10 to 14, and 178 for those aged 15 to 19. For the age groups including people aged 20 to 45, the incidence rates range from 147 to 157, i.e., more than three times higher than the infection rate among people aged 80 and over.

“The incidence rate among all the age groups for children and young people is higher than it was during the second wave,” states the RKI’s study on childcare facilities. And if one examines the study’s Excel spreadsheet, one makes the shocking discovery that thousands and thousands of children have been infected by COVID-19 since the beginning of the year, with virtually no comment from the media.

Many districts and cities continue to have very high incidence rates. On 12 May, more than half of Germany’s 412 districts (239) had an incidence of more than 100 infections per 100,000 inhabitants. Eight districts had incidences above 250. Only 21 had an incidence rate below 50.

Even an incidence rate of 50 provides no security, as serious scientists like Brinkmann and Meyer-Hermann have been stressing for months. Only when the seven-day incidence falls substantially below 35 will local health agencies be able to contact trace every infection to prevent new outbreaks.

What would happen if B.1.617, the so-called Indian variant, spread throughout Europe? On May 10, the World Health Organisation declared it to be a global variant of concern (VOC). It is raging out of control in India, infecting several hundred thousand people every day.

The *Guardian* noted on 12 May that the Indian variant is spreading rapidly in Britain. In just two weeks, it has increased its share of COVID-19 infections from 1 percent to 11 percent, with particularly sharp increases in London and northwest England. Only a few isolated cases, such as in Cologne, have been identified thus far in Germany. However, the British variant, B.1.1.7, rapidly established itself as the dominant strain in Germany.

New outbreaks confirm these warnings, but they are systematically ignored. Repeated outbreaks have been recorded at schools and childcare facilities since the Easter holidays. Another outbreak was reported at a refugee accommodation centre in Mainz, where at least 12 out of the 63 residents have been sickened by the virus.

The pandemic is a global problem, which is indicated by the ancient Greek words *pan* (comprehensive) and *demos* (citizenry). It can only be resolved globally, and this is something that the bourgeois politicians are neither willing nor able to do. The coronavirus pandemic is not merely a medical, but above all a political catastrophe. It has laid bare the bankruptcy of all governments and the capitalist system as a whole. For more than a year, governments of all political stripes have refused to take the necessary measures because they would restrict the profits of the tiny wealthy elite.

The working class must draw the correct conclusions from this. They must organise independent rank-and-file committees in order to protect themselves and their families. Only a Europe-wide general strike can impose a lockdown and create the conditions to bring the pandemic under control.



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