Lifting of restrictions by German authorities sabotages vaccine progress

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The COVID-19 pandemic has claimed an average of about 200 lives per day over the past two months in Germany. After the seven-day incidence rate of cases per 100,000 people was brought below 100 due to the rollout of the first vaccine dose and the population's efforts, the federal and state governments are seeking to outdo each other with reopening proposals. The effect will be to drive up the death toll. The basis for this is the new Federal Infection Protection Act.

In Lower Saxony, hotels are being reopened for residents of the state, and in Schleswig-Holstein and Bavaria, tourists from across the country have been permitted to travel since last Saturday and today, respectively.

In North-Rhine Westphalia, the most populous state in the country and one that has played a pioneering role throughout the pandemic in abandoning COVID-19 restrictions, all schools will return to in-person learning on 31 May, as long as the incidence in the district is below 100 per 100,000 inhabitants. Minister President Armin Laschet (Christian Democrats) declared that this must happen "as soon as possible" and "prior to the summer holidays."

The state government knows full well that this will endanger tens of thousands of students and their families. Bodo Löttgen, a CDU deputy in the state parliament, reported on Wednesday that 135,421 children under the age of 19 have already been infected in North-Rhine Westphalia. This equates to 17.2 percent of all infections. Ten percent of hospitalised patients still complain of symptoms six months after their infection. Twelve children in the state are currently in intensive care.

Although infection rates among students are catastrophically high, and generally neither teachers nor parents are fully vaccinated, the federal and state governments are demanding a swift resumption of full-time in-person classes. Franziska Giffey (Social Democrats, SPD), who resigned as Family Affairs Minister on Wednesday, told RBB Radio on Tuesday,"If we're talking about outdoor restaurants, then we also need to talk about how we get back to business as usual."

The unsafe reopening of schools is a recipe for incalculable misery. According to a survey conducted by 723 epidemiologists, which was published by the *New York Times* on Saturday, around half said that the comprehensive inoculation of the entire population, including children, was a prerequisite for the lifting of other restrictions, including a return to full in-person learning.

In April, the federal Education Ministers Conference (KMK) insisted that school exams go forward despite the pandemic, and that this required "as much in-person learning as possible." The ministers' agreement claimed that students have been able to "prepare well for their final exams despite the pandemic situation"—an assertion that, notwithstanding the best efforts of teachers, can only be described as a blatant lie.

On Monday, KMK president Britta Ernst (SPD) rejected calls for the purchase of air filtration devices for every school, commenting that this would "not produce the breakthrough" and it would "still be necessary to continue opening windows to ventilate classrooms." Ernst described the regular testing of students as a "major contribution to making our schools safer," even though the rapid tests have been proven not to detect every infection.

Driven by the desire to maximize profits, the ruling class is working to trigger another wave of infections and sacrifice countless people.

Already, daily outbreaks, ignored with a shrug of the shoulders by the political establishment, demonstrate the dangers. For example, in the working class district of Velbert-Birth in North-Rhine Westphalia on Tuesday, an entire housing estate had to be sealed off after a mass outbreak was triggered by the B.1.617 variant. Of the 200 residents, 26 caught the virus.

This variant, which was first discovered in India, has been categorised as a variant of concern by the WHO and is regarded as extremely difficult to combat. It is already responsible for almost 2 percent of all infections in Germany, and current data suggests it is more infectious than the British B.1.1.7. In Britain, the Indian variant already

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accounts for 5 percent of all infections.

These realities expose the class character of the pandemic, which is hitting working class families with full force. The German and European governments refuse to close down all nonessential production, scrap the patents for vaccines, and distribute vaccines already available in a socially just way.

In Germany, almost five months after the beginning of the vaccine campaign, only 38.2 percent of the population had received a first dose as of Wednesday. Only 11.9 percent are fully vaccinated. According to an estimate by the Robert Koch Institute, only 5 percent of those aged under 59 have received a second dose, and even among those aged 80 and over, almost one third have not been fully vaccinated.

But the government has declared its intention to allow the future administration of vaccines to be left up to the free market and the right of the strongest.

To this end, federal Health Minister Jens Spahn announced the complete abandonment of the existing vaccine prioritisation groups by 7 June. He justified this by saying that it is necessary to accelerate the vaccine campaign. Prior to this, the states of Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria, Berlin, and Saxony announced they would allow doctors' surgeries to vaccinate without adhering to priority groups.

The measure, which was criticised both by the German Ethics Council and the Patient Advocacy Foundation, is aimed above all at giving more privileged sections of the population access to the vaccine and strengthening the tourism industry.

Left Party parliamentary group leader Dietmar Bartsch even called for the abandonment of the priority groups before the end of the month. On the Anne Will talk show, he justified this by claiming that unused vaccine doses are being destroyed. A fact check performed by Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland confirmed that this is untrue.

On the contrary, according to a report by *Der Spiegel*, millions of people will still have to wait months for their first dose. Ulrich Weigeldt, the federal chair of the German General Practitioners' Association, told the news magazine, "There won't be more vaccinations for first doses, but initially less." A statement from the Insured Doctors Association noted that the quantities ordered of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine for first doses would be restricted to two vials per doctor's surgery this week, which equates to between 12 and 14 vaccines per surgery each week.

The supply of vaccines from the US producer Johnson & Johnson and the British-Swedish pharmaceutical company AstraZeneca is being limited by trade war conflicts between the European Union, Britain, and the United States. After the US government shut down a factory of a Johnson & Johnson supplier due to a glitch, the EU recently announced it would not conclude any further contracts with AstraZeneca.

Referring to the expected supply shortages and the currently existing prioritisation rules for second doses, *Der Spiegel* concluded, "until 4 July, i.e., during the first four weeks after the ending of priority groups, there will be just over 10 million doses of BioNTech and Moderna for people not yet vaccinated."

The consequences of the shortages are already visible. In Bavaria, the vaccine centres will not administer first doses for several weeks, because the limited supplies are fully taken up with second doses. The reasons for this are the changed recommendation from the Permanent Vaccine Commission for the AstraZeneca vaccine and the lengthening of the interval between the first and second doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines, which led to an above average number of first doses being administered in April.

Viola Priesemann, head of a research group on dynamics and self-organisation at the Max Planck Institute in Göttingen, warned in a comment to *Der Spiegel* against "reopening and throwing away" the declining case numbers brought about by increased immunity through vaccinations. The decisive factor in slowing the spread of the pandemic was "the behaviour of the people." Under these conditions, Priesemann continued, it would be possible to bring the seven-day incidence down to 50 per 100,000 inhabitants within three weeks. "If we open more than is permissible due to the progress of vaccinations, the decline could take eight weeks, or even be thrown into reverse."

The glaring contrast between a scientific and rational programme against the pandemic, on the one hand, and the governments' policies of mass infections on the other, makes clear that an independent political intervention of the working class is necessary. For this purpose, the International Committee of the Fourth International is calling for the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to unify working people around the world against the ruling elite's inhumane policies.

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