

Teachers' union supports return to regular operations at schools and nurseries in Germany

Martin Nowak, Johannes Stern
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In recent weeks, several federal states have already reopened schools and nurseries on a larger scale. Now, in connection with the general offensive to open up the economy, the complete return to regular operations is being prepared.

In Germany's most populous federal state North Rhine-Westphalia, schools are to switch to fully in-person teaching from May 31. In Schleswig-Holstein, all grades are again being taught face-to-face in almost all districts and towns in the state as of this week.

In Bavaria, according to state Premier President Markus Söder (Christian Social Union, CSU), the "vast majority of pupils" should be back at school after the Whitsun holidays. The same goal is being pursued by the state government in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania led by state Premier Manuela Schwesig (Social Democratic Party, SPD). In all other federal states, including Thuringia, which is led by the Left Party, school and nursery reopenings are also being pushed forward.

The fact that the federal and state governments are taking this step despite the still high incidence of infections, thus endangering the health and lives of millions of children, parents and educators, has exclusively economic reasons. Beyond seemingly endless demagogic reports about the psychological suffering, the endangerment of children's well-being in the lockdown and studies about supposedly "safe schools" in the pandemic, the decision-makers are primarily concerned with freeing up parents to work.

Like last year, the Education and Science Union (GEW) is playing a key role in pushing through the "profits before lives" policy in the face of enormous resistance among students, educators and parents. On Thursday, GEW national chair Marlis Tepe told the ZDF morning show, "We are in favour of opening schools as quickly as possible, depending on the incidence level." Within a "range of 50 to 100" per 100,000, the GEW pleads "to stay with alternating teaching methods. If it then goes down, then you can go to face-to-face teaching."

Tepe had already backed the move to in-person teaching with the slogan, "Whoever opens, must vaccinate." The early vaccination of all teachers meant "the health protection of teachers, pupils and their parents could be secured," she

claimed.

Everyone knows this is not true. Firstly, the vaccination of teachers is progressing slowly, and a large proportion of teachers are still waiting to be vaccinated. And secondly, even if teachers were fully vaccinated, schools would be breeding grounds for the virus, posing a massive threat to the health and lives of unvaccinated students and their families.

Even vaccinated teachers would be far from safe. COVID-19 variants such as the dangerous Indian variant, for which the effectiveness of many vaccines is at least limited, are also spreading massively in Germany. Worldwide, the pandemic is out of control and about 13,000 people are dying every day. Germany is currently one of the most affected countries in Europe, with around 10,000 infected and 200 deaths per day. According to the Robert Koch Institute (RKI), at least two more teachers died of COVID-19 in May, bringing the total to at least 33 teachers and educators. Almost 900 have had to be hospitalised since the pandemic began.

Despite this, the individual GEW state associations are competing in supporting and pushing the reopening policies of their respective state governments. The current orgy of reopening is a direct result of their policies. Here is just a brief overview of some of the statements and pronouncements of the GEW in recent weeks.

At the end of April, the GEW Saxony published a "Wake-up Call for Open Child Day Care Facilities and Schools." This had been preceded by the interim closure of nurseries and primary schools in most districts of Saxony. The right-wing state coalition of Christian Democrats (CDU), SPD and Greens had previously pursued an "incidence-independent" reopening course—i.e., a policy openly based on herd immunity. Since the incidence level in almost all Saxony's districts was around 200, the so-called "federal emergency brake" led to closures in many places. In its "wake-up call," the GEW complained, "We find it intolerable that for many a girl or boy the nursery or school is the only safe haven and that this place is now closing for them again."

The GEW Rhineland-Palatinate also openly pleaded for keeping schools and nurseries open regardless of incidence

level. “The GEW Rhineland-Palatinate is critical of setting a fixed incidence value as a threshold,” it said in a statement published on April 20. A “fixed orientation towards the incidence value” would result in “frequent changes to the currently applicable measures and thus little planning ability and reliability for employees and parents.” This is unequivocal: nurseries and schools should be kept open even when incidence rates are high so that parents can show up at work in a “plannable and reliable” manner. Explicitly, the GEW demanded “regular operations in everyday life with coronavirus,” which should only be “watched over by the local health authorities.”

GEW Hesse already advocated a return to face-to-face teaching in April. In an April 1 press release the union stated that “for pedagogical and social reasons, it is a priority that pupils from grade 7 onwards are enabled to return to face-to-face teaching—at least daily.” Hesse GEW Deputy President Tony C. Schwarz stressed in the same release, “For us, this is the most urgent next reopening step that must be taken as soon as the infection situation permits. The students in these grades have not been to school since Christmas.”

Then, on April 13, the chair of GEW Hesse, Maike Wiedwald, followed up and demanded in another press release, “An early return to face-to-face teaching for these classes, at least daily, must now be a priority.” When state Education Minister Alexander Lorz (CDU) finally announced at the beginning of May that “in more and more regions of Hesse, pupils, in particular, can go back to school regularly,” the GEW supported this push.

In Lower Saxony, too, the GEW is at the forefront of the reopening policy. When the state government set the course for a return to face-to-face teaching at the beginning of May, the GEW state chair Laura Pooth cynically declared, “The intended alternating teaching [at home and in schools] will have a positive effect on children and young people, provided the schools have been able to provide comprehensive health protection.”

In Berlin, the GEW is working closely with the SPD-Left Party-Green Senate (state executive) to push through the unsafe return to nurseries and schools. When Berlin’s education senator (state minister) Sandra Scheeres (SPD) announced the return of nurseries to regular operations last week, the chairperson of the GEW Berlin, Doreen Siebern, complained in a statement that “educators are not included in the planning of the nursery reopenings.” The GEW vehemently rejects launching protests or even strikes against the ruthless approach of the Senate, as in all other federal states. As a result, since Monday of this week, Berlin’s nurseries have been back in regular operation—with unforeseeable consequences for children, parents, educators and the infection rate in the capital.

With its support for the reopening policy, the GEW consistently maintains its right-wing policy in the pandemic. As part of the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB), it

already supported the federal government’s billion-euro bailout package for the banks and corporations at the beginning of last year. Since then, Germany’s largest union IG Metall, public sector union Verdi and the other individual unions have played the central role in keeping the factories and workplaces open, even under the most precarious conditions, so that the billions gifted to big business and the rich can be recovered from the working class.

The reactionary and anti-working-class role of the trade unions underlines the importance of the Action Committees for Safe Education that teachers, students and parents have built in Germany and internationally over the past year of the pandemic. Workers can only defend their interests if they organise independently of the capitalist parties and unions and develop an international perspective and strategy against the murderous “profits before lives” policy.

To stop the pandemic, all schools and non-essential businesses must be closed and all workers and their families must be given the necessary financial support. Resources must be allocated for mass testing, contact tracing and the best medical care for all those infected. The production and distribution of the vaccine must be massively scaled up and removed from the constraints of capitalist profit so that the entire world population is rapidly immunised against the virus.

Then, under conditions where there is sufficient levels of immunization and very low infection rates, billions must be invested to ensure safe teaching conditions in schools and nurseries. At the same time, thousands of additional teachers and educators must be hired and their salaries must be raised significantly.

We appeal to all teachers, students and parents who want to fight for these goals to join the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees today and build action committees for safe education at their institutions.



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