

# Germany's premature easing of lockdown measures threatens workers' lives and livelihoods

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On Monday the German government gave the green light for the opening up of most of the country's schools, and crowds have gathered in the warm weather in parks, promenades and pubs. Normal schooling and holidays should now be possible again, according to Chancellor Merkel, regardless of vaccination statistics.

The pandemic, however, is by no means over. The price for the risky easing of restrictions will be paid by the working class. Fresh outbreaks of COVID-19 continue to take place in production halls, care homes and in agricultural and transport enterprises. Little is reported of such cases in the bourgeois media, due to the failure of employers, politicians and the trade unions to provide a full picture of infection incidence. Only sporadic reports reach the public.

A major outbreak took place in mid-May at a Deutsche Bahn (German Rail) site in Fulda. As BuzzFeed News Germany reported, more than 60 of around 600 workers at the location tested positive. Neither Deutsche Bahn nor the transport union, EVG, have disclosed how many workers suffered severe symptoms or had to be hospitalised.

Buzzfeed News writes that the press office of the district of Fulda only gave a very vague answer to its enquiries, declaring that there were "high numbers of cases in four different companies" in the district. Since then, the situation had quieted down "in three of the four companies." The fourth company, apparently, is Deutsche Bahn.

Care workers in hospitals and retirement homes also continue to be affected. In Alzey, Hesse, two nursing staff and seven patients at a DRK (German Red Cross) hospital were infected last week when a staff member who had already been vaccinated once against COVID-19 unknowingly passed on the virus.

An asparagus farm in Lower Saxony has been experiencing a particularly large outbreak since mid-April. At Thiermann GmbH in Kirchdorf, one of the largest asparagus farms in Germany, no fewer than 144 workers were infected with COVID-19 up until the Whitsun spring

break. The first infected workers were discovered among the more than 1,000 harvest workers as early as April 18, but it was only 10 days later that proper tests were carried out. The virus therefore had 10 days to spread unhindered.

When the responsible health department finally carried out extensive tests, 47 workers tested positive, and since then nearly 100 more have been added to the list of those positive. The factory was not shut down and the direct contacts of those infected were not identified. A spokeswoman for the district told Deutsche Welle (DW) that the authorities were unable to track contacts "because of the diffuse nature of the infection within the farm." Instead, a quarantine was imposed on the entire premises. Workers were not allowed to leave the farm, which was monitored by the police and private security guards. The workers were, however, "allowed" to continue working and ran the constant risk of also becoming infected.

This meant the virus was able to spread unhindered throughout the entire workforce. Neither the company nor the health department are willing to give any information about how many of the infected workers at the Thiermann asparagus farm were seriously ill and had to be hospitalised. Workers who spoke to DW reported that up to five people were in hospital and at least one person had a severe COVID-19 infection.

Workers reported that they share a room in twos and threes, but then work in different parts of the farm. "No attention is paid to who lives together," one worker reported. Most of the time it was not even possible to abide by distance rules when working. In the sorting plant, for example, the harvest workers are led to work in groups of 50, and then divided into groups of 12.

A group of about a hundred workers apparently tried to oppose this practice and decided to go on strike the night after testing took place. Fearing the virus, they did not go to work for two days. As one worker told DW, they also demanded better pay, but had received nothing so far.

The harvest workers are paid a gross minimum wage of €9.50 (net: €6.80) per hour, which is linked to a bonus system. In addition, €9.80 per day are deducted from the wage for accommodation and lunch. To make the work worthwhile the workers toil seven days a week, for up to 11 hours a day. These gruelling hours and hard work also contributed to COVID-19's ability to spread so quickly and widely.

As was the case last year, the pandemic has revealed the brutal and exploitative conditions for seasonal workers who keep the food industry running. This was underlined by reports from Polish women workers to DW. On the day of the testing, women who tested positive were made to wait outside until 11 p.m. before being taken to new quarters. A number broke out in tears because they wanted to go home to Poland but were not allowed to. The police strictly enforced the work quarantine.

The latest outbreaks show once again that businessmen and politicians put profits before workers' lives. The authorities and the media play along and cover up such cases, while the German trade union movement makes sure that workforces remained uninformed. This is especially true for the IG Metall union in the auto and car supplier industry, as well as for the service sector union, Verdi, with members at airports and in logistics centres like Amazon.

The pandemic is an international phenomenon; it will not be defeated until it is under control in every country. Until then, there is a danger that new virus variants will spread, driving the number of cases up again and once again filling intensive care units.

In Finland, the "India" virus variant B.1.617 is currently spreading in several hospitals, and is also affecting people who have already been vaccinated once. In Canada, too, there have been hundreds of cases of so-called breakthrough infections, i.e., infections of people who have already been vaccinated once. And a new pathogen has been reported in Vietnam, which had so far come through the pandemic well. The new variant dangerously combines characteristics of the British and Indian virus strains.

In Germany, incidence figures are currently stagnating at around an average seven-day incidence of 35 new infections per 100,000 inhabitants. What is not mentioned is that the incidence in children is much higher. Among 10-14 year olds, the last known incidence figure from May 25 exceeded 100. Only 41.5 percent of the population in Germany has received a first vaccination, and less than 16 percent are fully vaccinated.

At the same time, the B.1.617 variant is spreading across Europe. As has been shown in Great Britain, vaccination against this virus is only effective after a second vaccination dose, which the vast majority of people in Germany lack.

For children, there is still no vaccination programme.

Government politicians are using the declining coronavirus numbers to give a false sense of security. Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) claimed at the beginning of this week that "safe schooling" is possible again, "regardless of whether a child is vaccinated or not." The same applies to holidays, she said, which must be possible again "both in other European countries and in Germany." Merkel absurdly justified her remarks by saying that testing was "perfectly sufficient"—at a time when there are multiple reports of systematic fraud in mass testing.

It is clear that the statements by establishment politicians cannot be trusted. They have proven to be reliable servants of big business and the banks since the beginning of the pandemic.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party call upon workers to unite in independent action committees and take control of the pandemic in their own hands. The first step must be to pass on all information about the extent of the COVID-19 cases to workforces and workers' neighbourhoods. In order to coordinate the struggles internationally, the International Committee of the Fourth International is calling for the building of an International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

An important goal is the reinstatement of London bus driver David O'Sullivan, who was sacked by the bus company Metroline for warning his colleagues about the risk of coronavirus infection in the depot where he worked. In London, 60 bus drivers have already died from COVID-19. David O'Sullivan's reinstatement is a test case for international solidarity, and every class-conscious worker must support his struggle!



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