

Despite threat of Delta variant, German government continues reopening policy

Marianne Arens

20 June 2021

Although the new Delta variant of the coronavirus is spreading rapidly in Europe, the German government is downplaying and covering up the danger in order to continue its back-to-work policy.

The Delta variant (B.1.617.2) first emerged in India, where it caused a near-vertical rise in coronavirus numbers and a death toll of nearly 400,000. It has since spread to the UK, where the highly contagious variant has caused a new surge in infection numbers and forced the Johnson government to delay the announced end of coronavirus measures by four weeks.

On Friday, the Portuguese authorities sealed off the capital, Lisbon, for the weekend. “The numbers are increasing very rapidly,” Vitor Almeida, from the crisis unit of the Portuguese Medical Association, told news programme *Tagesschau*. “The reason is unmistakably also the Delta variant, which is dominant in Lisbon. Hence the government’s decision to set up a security cordon around Lisbon over the weekend.” Almeida regarded the main problem to be in the city’s working class suburbs, where people lived very close together and cannot maintain social distancing.

But what are the German authorities doing to warn the population and take precautions? The answer is nothing. The issue is being systematically pushed into the background and played down. Even in the news about Portugal, *Tagesschau* was quick to reassure “vacationers from Germany” that the situation in Lisbon meant they would only be affected in “exceptional cases.”

Currently, the European soccer championship is dominating all TV channels and news broadcasts, and the stadiums are being increasingly filled. Together with the constant reports about vacations, tourism and summer events, this conveys a mood that the pandemic is over. In Berlin, the ban on dancing is just being lifted, and up to 250 guests are now allowed at open-air events without masks and social distancing.

Yet the news is anything but reassuring. More and more evidence suggests that the Delta variant is also spreading in

Germany.

In Munich, 45 cases of the variant have been officially detected. The Robert Koch Institute (RKI) reports a doubling of the share of the Delta variant from 3 percent to more than 6 percent of all coronavirus infections, but these figures are already a few days old. In contrast, a southern German laboratory group that has sequenced coronavirus swabs at several sites reports that the highly contagious variant is already responsible for 11 percent of all new SARS-CoV-2 infections in the Munich area.

In Baden-Württemberg, the state health office in Stuttgart warned on Friday that a significant increase had been observed for two weeks. In the Heidenheim district, two school classes and a day care group had to be sent into quarantine after a major outbreak was detected. Evidence of the Delta variant was found in no fewer than 89 infected individuals.

In North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany’s most populous state, about 150 students in the neighbouring towns of Soest and Werl were sent into quarantine on Wednesday and Thursday after the Delta variant was detected in four outbreaks. This affected the graduating classes of the secondary school in Soest and an entire elementary school in Werl.

Following a graduation ceremony, “clear contact tracing was no longer possible,” the Soest health department explained. Since May 12, there have been repeated cases of coronavirus in this district, in which the Delta virus was detected. This variant was also detected at an elementary school in Hamburg.

For a long time, doctors and virologists have been urging that the new variant be taken seriously, including Carsten Watzl, secretary-general of the German Society for Immunology (DGfI).

“It is safe to assume that by autumn at the latest, the Delta variant will be the dominant variant in Germany,” Watzl told the *Augsburger Allgemeine* newspaper on June 17. He urged the acceleration of the pace of vaccination. What was urgent was the installation of air filters and other structural

responses at schools, the immunologist warned. Especially “if a great many children are not vaccinated and the Delta variant comes in the autumn, there is a threat of more outbreaks in schools again.”

What is particularly troubling about the Delta variant is that it also threatens people who have only received one vaccine dose. Only full vaccination with two doses provides some immunity in the case of this variant.

Against the background of this danger, it is particularly alarming that only a small proportion of the population in Germany have had two shots. Just 50 percent have received the first dose, and only 25 percent the second. Thus, many millions of 20- to 50-year-olds, who are particularly active in professional and social life, are still unvaccinated and without any immune protection.

Yet people are being encouraged to act as if the pandemic is over, being sent back to work. Schools and nurseries will reopen without restrictions and the mandatory wearing of masks before the summer vacations.

“When I heard that I was shocked,” said virologist Melanie Brinkmann in an interview with *Der Spiegel*. “Masks are the least of the evils, after all. We’re in a good starting position: it’s summer, you can open windows in classrooms, incidence rates are low, we have vaccinations, we’re testing.” But instead of proceeding with care, politicians were “again acting impatiently and without a plan.”

The same *Spiegel* article quotes Dirk Brockmann, from Humboldt University Biology Institute, saying, “We are making the same mistakes again, while we now have the chance to apply intelligent reopening strategies ... Instead, we are now again wildly relaxing everything at once.”

The government is fully aware of the dangers of its unscrupulous actions. Health Minister Jens Spahn (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) said on Friday at a press conference with RKI chief Lothar Wieler that it was “not a question of if, but when the Delta variant will prevail in Germany and throughout continental Europe.” Nevertheless, all politicians in the federal and state governments are continuing their dangerous reopening policy without restriction.

Although daily incidence numbers are just declining, reaching 10.3 per 100,000 on Friday, death rates remain very high; they have been in the range of about a hundred coronavirus deaths per day for days. More than 90,000 people have died from coronavirus in Germany so far, and hundreds of thousands will suffer from its effects for the rest of their lives. At least one in ten infected people struggle with Long Covid.

None of this has any impact on policymakers. The new variant is not taken as an occasion to publicize the enormous

danger of the pandemic, to do everything possible to keep it in check and prevent the spread of new variants. The interests of big business, the banking world and the super-rich take precedence. For them, 2020 was a very good year. According to the latest Global Wealth Report, the number of the world’s super-rich increased by about ten percent to 60,000, and they now own a combined 15 percent of the world’s wealth.

Just how mercilessly the banks and corporations are demanding back-to-work policies from governments is evident from a new proposal by the head of the Institute of the German Economy (IW), Prof. Michael Hüther. His institute has compared hours worked in Germany with those in Switzerland and Sweden. To leverage “dormant growth potential in the German labour market,” Hüther now proposes that blue- and white-collar workers work an average of two hours more per week and take 1.5 weeks less vacation. “There is unused potential in the German labour market,” reads an IW press release dated June 14, 2021.

It is clear that this is also the reason why nurseries and elementary schools must be fully reopened again at all costs. IW head Hüther made this clear in an interview with *Bild*. “Many women, for example, work part-time involuntarily because there is a lack of nursery places.” He said it was time to remedy the failures of the past and ensure that hundreds of thousands of women could work full-time.

It is also no coincidence that this economic institute compares German working hours with those in Switzerland and Sweden. These are the countries that have been among the most ruthless in enforcing back-to-work policies during the pandemic, causing a higher-than-average number of coronavirus deaths.

The political handling of coronavirus over the past 16 months has made clear that in Germany, as in every capitalist country, a ruthless profits-before-lives policy is being pursued, characterized by a high degree of criminal negligence and systematic cover-ups. This will only change when the working class itself intervenes and takes up the struggle for a workers’ government.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact