

As Delta variant spreads in German schools, government intensifies herd immunity policy

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The government's "profits before lives" policy has already led to rising infection figures again in recent weeks. Now, the federal and state governments are putting the lives and health of tens of thousands more people at risk by continuing unsafe face-to-face teaching at the end of the summer holidays.

Against the backdrop of an explosive spread of the Delta variant of the coronavirus throughout Europe, Federal Education Minister Anja Karliczek (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) told the Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland (RND) on Wednesday that "outbreaks at schools must be expected."

In primary schools, the minister said, there was "naturally the danger that school attendance... spreads coronavirus again more strongly in families and society and can then also affect those who cannot be vaccinated, for example, because of cancer." To "maintain regular classes" under these conditions, a "step-by-step plan" was necessary, "which determines how to react if the infection situation worsens."

This is unmistakable: Instead of comprehensively securing schools and day care centres against the highly contagious delta variant, children and youth, as well as their families, are to be infected according to a "step-by-step plan" in the interest of big business.

As virologist Melanie Brinkmann of the Helmholtz Centre for Infection Research warned RND at the beginning of the month, "the Delta variant will rush through schools very quickly after the summer holidays" if no "additional measures" are taken. Education Minister Karliczek, however, did not hold out the prospect of any precautions apart from tests and a limited obligation to wear masks and referred to the "responsibility of the Länder (federal states)" for the installation of air filtration systems.

The policy of profit maximisation and deliberate infection is being implemented by all the establishment parties, which are thus realising the programme of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) and increasingly adopting its slogans.

For example, at the beginning of the month, CDU candidate for chancellor in the September federal election, Armin Laschet, had already demanded that the population "live with the virus." In an interview with broadcaster ARD, he added that compulsory testing and wearing masks in schools could be lifted "if the incidence figures remain stable."

Social Democratic Party (SPD) chancellor candidate Olaf Scholz recently spoke of the need for a "normal school day" and called for "clear and courageous reopening steps." SPD politician Karl Lauterbach told broadcaster n-tv that in future there would be "no more lockdowns."

The nominally "left-wing" opposition parties are also putting the herd immunity policy into practice. The Greens sit in a total of 11 state governments where they are pushing the brutal reopening of the economy.

In Thuringia, Bodo Ramelow (Left Party) leads a Left Party-SPD-Green coalition. The state has almost always recorded the highest infection figures during the pandemic and ranks second—after Saxony, where the Greens are also in government—among the federal states with the most infections in relation to the number of inhabitants. Ramelow himself has repeatedly praised the Swedish government's policy of herd immunity.

The unsafe opening of schools has already contributed to a renewed catastrophe in other countries. In the UK, where the Delta variant has spread furiously through schools, it already accounts for well over 90 percent of new infections. Although more than half the population is fully vaccinated, the country is heading for new highs with more than 50,000 new daily infections at last count.

Figures from Public Health England (PHE) show that in the working-class city of Liverpool, the incidence of coronavirus among 10- to 14-year-olds increased tenfold in the second half of June. In the week ending June 20, more than 16,000 schoolchildren fell ill in the UK—yet pupils are no longer to be quarantined if there is a suspected case of coronavirus in their class. Social distancing and mask-wearing requirements are to be removed at the start of the new school year in September.

The Netherlands is currently experiencing the steepest increase in new infections since the beginning of the pandemic. Within 14 days, the infection rate has increased tenfold and was recently back above 10,000 new infections in a single day. At the end of June, the right-wing government of Mark Rutte had, among other things, eliminated compulsory mask-wearing at primary schools.

In Israel, which started vaccinations early compared to European countries, the Delta variant has also become the

dominant strain. Israel's Ministry of Health had already admitted at the end of June that "about half" of those newly infected were schoolchildren and reported new outbreaks in "close to 30 schools" in the country. Although the summer holidays began in Israel on June 19, many pupils are still being sent to schools so their parents can work.

The Delta variant has also long been prevalent in Germany. The R (reproduction) value is above 1 for the first time in months and the rate of new infections is rising steeply. Schoolchildren are currently at twice the risk of infection as the average population. According to the figures of the Robert Koch Institute (RKI), the incidence rate of 15-19 year-olds is over 14 and that of 20-24 year-olds even over 18. Among 10-14-year-olds, the 7-day incidence rate reached a relative peak of 12 a fortnight ago.

Despite this ominous development, all federal states are maintaining regular classes and eliminating even the most basic protective measures. The compulsory use of masks in classrooms hardly exists in any of the federal states. According to official figures, more than 60,000 pupils have been infected with the virus so far, of whom more than 500 had to be hospitalised and two have died. If infections spread further in schools, tens of thousands of students would have to be hospitalised.

More than 16 months since the start of the pandemic, a growing number of studies highlight the prevalence of prolonged disorders following COVID-19 infection and the dangerous consequences it can have.

A study published on July 5 this year by scientists at the University of Heidelberg found that 12 months after a COVID-19 infection, only 22.9 percent of patients at the university hospital were completely free of symptoms. According to the study, the most common symptoms were "reduced physical performance (56.3 percent), fatigue (53.1), dyspnoea (37.5), concentration problems (39.6), word-finding problems (32.3) and sleep problems (26.0)."

The researchers concluded that "neurocognitive Long COVID symptoms persist for at least one year after the onset of COVID-19 symptoms and can significantly reduce quality of life."

Another study by the University of Mainz, in which more than 10,000 people participated, concluded that more than 42 percent of those infected with COVID-19 are unaware that they carry the virus and can pass it on unknowingly.

Despite the study only examining those between 25 and 88 years of age, it was immediately misused by politicians and the media to drum up support for unprotected in-person classes. Although the study found that children are not particularly strong drivers of infection, the risk of infection increases sharply with the number of people in a household.

The class nature of the pandemic is also clearly demonstrated once again by the study. "People with a higher social status are more likely to know about their infection," study leader Philipp

Wild told news programme Tagesschau. "People with a low socio-economic status," on the other hand, are "particularly affected" by COVID-19, although these layers consistently adhere to hygiene rules. "The socially worse off also bear the brunt of the crisis financially," the researcher said.

A renewed mass infection, with all its devastating consequences, can only be prevented if students, teachers and workers take their safety into their own hands and enforce appropriate measures. To this end, rank-and-file committees for safe education must be founded everywhere.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) is fighting for a socialist programme against the herd immunity policies of the capitalist governments and advocates the following demands:

? Schooling only in fixed small groups and with extensive protective measures: As long as the pandemic is not defeated, all pupils who are in school must be given the best possible protection. This includes sufficient protective equipment such as masks and disinfectants and the installation of air filters.

? Suspend compulsory attendance and provide additional days of leave and sick leave: No one should be forced to go to school under these dangerous conditions. Students must have the opportunity to take time off without red tape. Parents who stay at home to look after their children must receive full compensation for their earnings—even during quarantine.

? Digital learning aids for all: No one should be denied the same quality of participation in lessons due to a lack of technical equipment. All students must be provided with the necessary devices and internet access.

? Provision of vaccines for all: There must be immediate studies to see whether safe vaccines for children exists or can be developed. International vaccine production must be taken away from the profit-grubbing of a small group of pharmaceutical companies and planned socially.

? No exam pressure and learning stress: Students must not be forced into school by pressure to perform. Teacher and student committees must be allowed to develop and establish alternative methods of determining learning success.

? Hire hundreds of thousands more teachers and support staff: Instead of giving away billions to the banks and big corporations, these funds must be invested in the education system to ensure a good and safe education for all.



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