

Rise in coronavirus outbreaks in German workplaces

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Germany's new Infection Protection Act has been in force since 24 November. The law stipulates that employees are only allowed access to workplaces according to the 3G rule. This means that they must prove that they have been vaccinated, have recovered from a Corona infection or tested negative. Governments and corporations claim that this is to protect workers, but this is patently not true.

The aim of the Infection Protection Act introduced by the Germany's new "traffic light" coalition of the Social Democratic Party, the Greens and neo-liberal Free Democratic Party is not to protect the health and lives of the population, but rather to ensure that the economy and profits flourish as the pandemic spreads uncontrollably.

For almost two years the principle of "profits before lives" has determined official pandemic policy. Governments and corporations are ruthlessly accepting tens of thousands of deaths in order to keep factories, warehouses, offices and schools open.

Protection against infections and the health of the population is not and never was the priority. This would have necessitated a rigorous vaccination campaign, far-reaching contact restrictions and, above all, the closure of schools and non-essential businesses—with resources made available to deal with the resulting social consequences—until the virus was suppressed.

Instead, against all warnings from scientists, schools were opened in the summer, contact restrictions lifted and vaccination centres closed. At the end of last week the COVID-19 death toll in Germany passed the 100,000 threshold, with the threat of at least as many more deaths this winter. This danger is compounded by the new Omicron variant, first identified in southern Africa, which is clearly different from the previous variants and much more contagious.

In addition to schools, workplaces are major hotspots for infection, but the facts and figures pertaining to infection are being carefully concealed. The ruling class have no interest in counting and making public the many thousands of cases of workers who have become infected in workplaces or

carried the virus into workplaces from their infected children. The number of workers who have died from COVID-19 has also been suppressed. Even the death toll among health care workers is no longer published.

Workers are left in the dark regarding the extent of coronavirus infections in their workplaces. There is no central accounting and evaluation of infections which would provide the basis for concrete protective measures. Even the local press is increasingly failing to report on outbreaks in factories. Companies are intent on covering up the figures anyway because they fear protests and economic losses.

Health offices are either unable to adequately trace the contacts of those infected or have been asked to stop doing so by political leaders. Earlier this year, enquiries to occupational health and safety authorities across Germany made by Report-Mainz and BuzzFeed News revealed that 90 percent had approached businesses about violations of COVID-19 regulations, but had imposed almost no fines and closed only a small minority of businesses. At best, companies were given verbal or written warnings.

Despite the suppression of statistics, skyrocketing national and state incidence rates plus occasional reports in the local press give some idea of the dangerous situation developing in many workplaces.

Last week, for example, the logistics company BLG in the port of Bremerhaven had to arrange mass testing after 19 employees tested positive for COVID-19. According to the company's own statements, around 1,300 employees were tested with no new cases detected. BLG is a global logistics company, which employs 20,000 workers in ten countries at a hundred locations in Europe, America, Africa and Asia. Over half of its staff work in Germany.

The city administration suspects that a factory meeting was behind the outbreak. A Bremerhaven spokesperson told local media that the health department was aware that company meetings with around 800 people had been held in rooms designed for 200 people. Social distancing had not been observed and those in attendance had not worn masks.

Also last week several major outbreaks were reported in

slaughterhouses. Sixty-one workers at the Vion slaughterhouse in Landshut (Bavaria) contracted the virus and the slaughter of animals was suspended for several days. Operations in cutting, packing, dispatch and other areas continued.

According to Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR), 40 employees initially tested positive last week and slaughter operations were suspended. At the beginning of the week, the number of infected persons had nevertheless risen, leaving the company—including those workers in quarantine—with just 90 workers from a total workforce of 400.

There had already been major COVID-19 outbreaks in slaughterhouses last year. In June 2020, more than 2,100 workers at Germany's largest slaughterhouse, Tönnies in Rheda-Wiedenbrück, contracted the virus. In November 2020, 100 workers at the Vion slaughterhouse in Vilshofen were infected. At the Vion slaughterhouse in Landshut, which is now affected again, 70 workers had been infected in December last year.

Vion insisted it had already introduced the 3G rule in September. According to a company spokesperson, a “considerable portion” of the Landshut workforce has been vaccinated twice. The seven-day incidence in the Landshut district was 869 (infection cases per 100,000 population) on November 25.

In Harsewinkel (NRW), an undisclosed number of workers have been infected at the sausage and ham producer Windau. “We're talking about an infection rate in the mid-single digits,” explained managing director Andreas Hilker, i.e. around 20 to 30 of the total workforce of 500. According to Hilker, “the positive detections are affecting our production for the first time since the outbreak of the pandemic.” The company plans to overcome the restrictions in production by additional work schedules. Harsewinkel had by far the highest incidence in the Gütersloh district with 454 as of November 15.

Here, too, the company boss emphasises that “the infections occur outside our company.” Staff are tested daily before starting work. The health department confirmed that hygiene controls, including extensive testing, are working.

This line of defence, i.e. that people are infected outside and not in workplaces, is aimed solely at preventing factory closures.

Due to the “good cooperation” between companies and the authorities, Clemens Küpper, spokesperson for the Baumgarte iron foundry in Bielefeld, was also able to declare in September that he was glad “we did not have to close down due to the administration.” In September, 54 of 260 employees were infected with the coronavirus, and production output had dropped by about 25 percent. Once again the short-term loss of turnover was made up for by

overtime working.

At the steel company Thyssenkrupp, the number of infected workers among the 13,000 strong workforce in Duisburg has doubled from 36 to 70 within a week. In addition, 40 workers are absent due to quarantine, i.e. a total of 110 workers are affected—and the trend is rising.

Alongside the health authorities and company managements, the trade unions and their affiliated works councils ensure that infection rates are concealed and business operations continue.

Health protection is subject to the German corporatist system of “co-determination.” In every company, the works council has the right to be informed about the coronavirus situation but in reality the works councils and trade unions systematically block and stonewall.

The World Socialist Web Site is seeking to gather and publish information about coronavirus outbreaks in workplaces since the beginning of the pandemic. This year we have reported on major outbreaks in slaughterhouses and in agriculture, but also at Deutsche Bahn, the Airbus plant in Hamburg, plus shipyards and factories in the steel, metal, auto and supplier industries. Currently the already meagre information provided by official channels is drying up more and more.

It is urgently necessary for workers to take action and organise themselves into independent action committees to defend their health, lives and jobs. Workers can no longer tolerate the conspiracy of silence on the part of corporate managements, works councils and the trade unions.

As a first step, the health hazards in every workplace must be disclosed. Action committees must gather information on infections, evaluate such information, draw the necessary conclusions and, if necessary, force the closure of factories. The alleged data protection that companies use to keep the workforce in the dark is a widely used excuse. A person's data cannot be more important than their own life.

We call on workers to gather information about the COVID-19 crisis in their workplace and contact us. As part of our Global Workers' Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic we will gather all the information, publish it and draw the appropriate conclusions—with your collaboration. We pledge to protect your identity and handle the information provided with the appropriate care.



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