

Meeting of the Network of Action Committees for Safe Education in Germany: “We are at the beginning of great mass struggles of the working class”

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On December 8, the Network of Action Committees for Safe Education organized a remarkable online meeting. Leaders of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) and its youth organization, International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) discussed the concrete impact of the pandemic with dozens of teachers, students, workers, caregivers, educators and parents. Officially, more than 104,000 coronavirus patients have already died in Germany alone, and the incidence rate among children is 1,000 per 100,000, meaning that at least 1 percent of schoolchildren have contracted COVID-19 in the past week.

“It is hard to imagine the suffering that is being created by this virus right now,” said meeting leader Gregor Link of the IYSSE in his welcoming remarks. He pointed out that the meeting “takes place exactly on the day when the parties of the ‘traffic light’ coalition took over the government. Everything indicates that they will continue and even intensify the profits-before-lives policy of the grand coalition.” The ‘traffic light’ coalition is named for the colours of the three parties, red (Social Democrats), yellow (Free Democrats) and Greens.

Responding, Christoph Vandreier, chairman of the SGP, said, “Only a social movement from below, a movement of workers, can prevent a new mass death.” He explained what would be necessary to end the pandemic and what the SGP is fighting for: “A rapid vaccination of the world’s population must be accompanied by measures of strict contact reduction to eliminate the virus. That means the lockdown of all nonessential businesses, schools and public life until the virus is eliminated!”

The emergence of the Omicron variant proved the need for such a policy, guided by science and human lives, Vandreier continued. Such a policy, however, was rejected by all governments, he said. “They all base their policies not on science but on stock markets.” That was why the creation of rank-and-file committees was so important. “We have to organize them independently of the establishment parties and the trade unions,” he said. “These action committees must unite internationally and fight for a scientific program to eliminate the virus.”

This point was underscored by the next speaker, Evan Blake, a leading member of the Socialist Equality Party in the US who writes regularly for the *World Socialist Web Site*. He spoke about the scope of the pandemic in the United States and the Global Workers’ Inquest, the investigation into the COVID-19 pandemic initiated by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).

In the US, the coronavirus pandemic is currently raging worse than ever, with an average of more than 1,300 coronavirus patients dying every day. The situation for children is particularly dire: according to the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC), 974 children under the age of 18 have died

from COVID-19 so far, including 306 children under the age of five! Yet schools are being kept open.

Blake, who is a teacher himself, reported on a new Biden administration program called “Test-to-Stay” aimed at keeping the classmates and friends of children who test positive in school as long as they test negative. This criminally negligent policy enjoys the support of the AFT teachers union and its president, Randi Weingarten, Blake said. Weingarten even invited an author of the reactionary Great Barrington Declaration and proponent of the “herd immunity” strategy, Jay Bhattacharya, to a public meeting as a “scientist,” he said.

Blake then introduced the Global Workers’ Inquest, the investigation into the COVID-19 pandemic initiated by the *World Socialist Web Site*. “These investigations are designed to uncover the most important aspects of the pandemic in each country to equip workers with the knowledge they need to ask the following questions: What was known before the pandemic? What was done in the crucial first three months? How was the conspiracy theory about the Wuhan labs propagated? What role did politicians, unions and the media play in this?” He concluded, “The most important aspect of the investigation is the experiences that workers in all industries have had during the pandemic. To that end, interviews with health care workers, autoworkers, educators and other workers are being conducted and published.”

Several students and teachers came forward in response to Evan Blake’s contribution.

Student **Laura** described conditions in schools in the devastating fourth coronavirus wave. At larger school complexes with several thousand students, she said, the virus was currently able to spread unhindered. “I have to use public transport to get to school, as most do in our area—these are ideal conditions for the complete mixing” of the infected and uninfected. She reported that the principal of her school had been sick and completely unable to work due to coronavirus from April to September. A good friend of Laura’s was also now infected, she said. “We have to carry on as normal, as if nothing is wrong, hearing the numbers of new infections and deaths every day, and are supposed to get used to new virus variants coming in all the time. It’s devastating.”

Other students confirmed what she had said. Twelfth grader **Florian** reported that although masks were mandatory in class, they were not during sports or music and singing lessons. Recently, there has also been much less testing. More and more students now thought that “something has to be done.” **Tamino** spoke about the extremely high incidence level of 1,300 among schoolchildren in Baden-Württemberg, “but that does not lead to schools being closed. Lessons are being held at full class size.” He concluded with a strong appeal, “Now is the time not only to be angry, but

to build independent action committees together with parents, teachers and students!”

Joshua from Bavaria pointed out the devastating consequences of unrestricted school openings. Bavarian hospitals were now so stretched to the limit that they had to fly patients out to other states, he said. “Worldwide, more than 180,000 nurses have already died since the pandemic began.” He mentioned the strikes by nursing staff in recent months, for example in Berlin at the Charité and Vivantes hospitals, but said they had been sold out by Verdi union officials. “With the new ‘traffic light’ government, nothing will change for the better,” Joshua said. That was why workers, students, parents and teachers need to organize into action committees independent of the unions. “The working class is the only social force willing and able to change society.”

Teachers who spoke echoed Evan Blake’s remarks. **Harald**, a high school teacher from the Ruhr area, said, “The school is part of social life. With Omicron, COVID-19 is spreading throughout society. But politicians are forcing us to keep schools open. In North Rhine-Westphalia, the state government has even banned students from wearing masks. They are determined to enforce their herd immunity strategy.” In this regard, he said, teachers were being put under massive pressure. “We feel like we are at their mercy and forced to accept everything,” Harald continued. “This is a dehumanizing policy. It’s really crucial that we organize ourselves into independent committees.”

A teacher from Berlin painted a vivid picture of the outbreaks in elementary schools there, and of the Senate’s (state executive) misleading directives that condemn school administrators to inaction. “The virus is spreading like wildfire, and no one is responding. Especially in working-class families, the virus rages like wildfire, because someone who tests positive can’t even isolate themselves in the small apartments.” She talked about the “frightening lie that children are not infectious,” citing numbers that clearly refuted this. “We’re heading for a health disaster,” she said. “Policymakers are not following the science and are letting the majority of the population run towards death.”

Other educators joined the discussion, and **Martin**, a nursery worker from Saxony, called it “unscrupulousness or boundless audacity” that all restrictions on schools and nurseries were lifted again after the autumn vacations. “Politicians are feigning compassion in a situation that they themselves have deliberately brought about.”

A teacher at a comprehensive school in the Meissen district, also a mother of three children, sent written greetings to the meeting, saying, “There is currently a real wave of infections taking place at our school. In my class, 8 out of 24 children have already tested positive since the autumn vacations. The class has not been closed. ... In the other five classes, positive cases have also been detected again and again—there have already been at least five cases in each class.” She went on to write that at her institution, “unvaccinated colleagues are absent for three to six weeks due to coronavirus, and we vaccinated ones have to cover a very high workload as a result.”

Marion, a nurse on a COVID ward, spoke movingly about “the extremely stressful fourth wave of coronavirus.” She had a son at home as well as an essential job, “God knows I’ve had too much to do lately with having to wrap dead people in a plastic bag.”

She said the already unbearable burden had increased greatly with the coronavirus pandemic. “Patients are completely isolated from their families. I’m forced to decide whether to take care of this sick person or that dying person—it’s a kind of triage,” Marion said. Despite the lack of time, nurses had to make phone calls to families and explain the dramatic situation to relatives. “A lot of people don’t understand. A few days ago, the person was perfectly fit, and now it’s about whether they have a living will? We have to listen to everything and take that home with us, too.”

Marion said a lockdown was something she would have been fine with last year. “The constant back and forth wears people down. Now a

lockdown is almost too late, it’s a very, very big problem.” Many nurses, she said, were simply at their limit. “They’re leaving the profession—there’s not much you can do about that, even with money.” She suggested that the problem was that “too few nurses are organizing in the union.”

That was contradicted by another speaker, one of two WISAG workers who attended the meeting. The WISAG workers have been fighting for their reinstatement at Frankfurt Airport for exactly one year. Ertu?rul reported that the Verdi union at the airport had not lifted a finger in their defence: “I have felt this myself.”

Corporations were using the pandemic to fire long-time, experienced workers and engage in wage dumping, he continued. He called COVID-19 “the worst thing that has affected people worldwide.” When the pandemic started, “We workers who personally handled the planes requested protective gear. This is an international air operation, there just have to be resources for something like this. But there was a lack of it.”

As a result, he said, 24 of his colleagues fell ill with coronavirus. “That was concealed, but we found out anyway. We were constantly told, ‘If you get sick, who’s going to do the work?’ That’s negligence and means human lives don’t matter anymore. We went along with everything, hoping it would pass. Then over 200 of us were given ‘compulsory redundancy’ notices.” And so it went on and on. “It affects thousands of colleagues, not only at WISAG, but also at Fraport and Lufthansa, at Opel in Rüsselsheim, Audi, BMW and Mercedes. Every corporation is eager to use the pandemic to get rid of workers.” He reported that he and his colleagues at WISAG had “founded the ‘Initiative of the Lobbyless’ against all the lobbyists.”

He said his colleagues did not want to give up, but many also did not know what else can be done. All this was very hard to bear, he said, and he could no longer sleep at night. With the new initiative, he said, it would probably be necessary “to address the unions as well: Unions, employers’ associations, parties—we have to invite everyone and take our initiative forward.”

To this, Christoph Vandreier, who summarized the discussion, responded, “These contributions by nurses, teachers and workers show how the class contradictions of capitalism have come to a head with the pandemic. But we are not responding to this with dejection, but with optimism. We are at the beginning of great mass struggles.” He pointed out that in the US, workers at John Deere, Volvo and elsewhere have already begun organizing resistance against the will of the unions. “All these struggles that are emerging now need a political perspective, and that perspective is internationalism and socialism.”

He continued, “We have concrete, science-based proposals on how to defeat the pandemic: through an elimination strategy that combines globally coordinated lockdowns with contact tracing. For this, the hundreds of billions of dollars and euros that politicians have poured into corporations and banks as ‘coronavirus aid’ must be used.” To implement this program, Vandreier continued, it was completely illusory to turn again to the unions, employers’ associations and the same parties that were, after all, in the governments at state and federal level: “They are responsible for over 100,000 deaths!” He called on all participants to actively participate in building the Action Committees for Safe Education and for Safe Workplaces and to support the Global Workers’ Inquest.

Finally, participants unanimously adopted a statement of solidarity with Lisa Diaz in the UK, who is facing massive pressure from the authorities for not sending her daughter to school amid the spread of the virus. Wigan council has threatened to fine her and wants to drag her in front of a family court. The network’s solidarity statement said:

“We support Lisa’s courageous decision and strongly condemn the campaign against her. ... An attack on one is an attack on all. ... We demand that schools, nurseries and all nonessential businesses be closed immediately as part of a global elimination strategy, and that the costs of

the social consequences be met. Form independent action committees to fight for a lockdown with full pay—against mass layoffs and restructuring!”



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