

Germany's new health minister continues “profits before lives” policies

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Last week the new German government was installed and Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz (SPD) presented his party's future ministers to the press. The Social Democratic Party is filling seven ministerial posts in the new cabinet, in addition to the Chancellery. In view of the escalation of the coronavirus pandemic, the name of the health minister was a source of considerable public and media interest.

Scholz has chosen the SPD deputy and health expert Karl Lauterbach as the government's new health minister. Lauterbach is a trained doctor, expert in epidemiology and a professor of health economics, and has gained a certain amount of popularity after warning in many public appearances of the devastating consequences of the pandemic—warnings that have usually proved true.

With his appointment, which remained controversial for some time, Scholz has apparently reacted to growing pressure from the German population. In particular amongst nursing staff, parents and teachers, there is growing anger about the existing official policy that subordinates the lives and health of the population to the interests and profits of the economy. With this nomination of Lauterbach as health minister, the future chancellor clearly hopes to be able to dampen popular anger, without changing his pro-business policies.

Scholz introduced Lauterbach as follows: “I'm sure most of citizens of this country have wished that the next health minister is a specialist, that he really knows his business—and that his name is Karl Lauterbach.” Kevin Kühnert, the SPD general secretary, wrote on Twitter: “Christmas-time is when wishes are granted. You wanted him - you've got him.”

The new health minister popped from the wings during the SPD press conference and immediately made several promises. In the next few weeks, he said,

the focus will be on lowering the COVID-19 caseload, “to the point where we can recommend travel without putting people at risk.” He further promised, “We will strengthen the health system ... With us, there will be no more cuts in health care services.”

Anyone who knows Lauterbach somewhat better knows how little justified such trust is. The traffic light coalition (a coalition of the SPD, the Greens and the neoliberal Free Democratic Party, FDP) needs him as a fig leaf for policies that will have even more deadly consequences than those of the outgoing government.

As minister, Lauterbach is subject to cabinet discipline, and the latter has already shown where it stands on the pandemic crisis. The first decision of the traffic light majority in the new Bundestag was to suspend the country's “national epidemic emergency status.”

Lauterbach also voted for the decision, justifying it with the argument that it was “legally required.” Marco Buschmann (FDP), the future Minister of Justice, cheered the decision to end the epidemic emergency status, saying that henceforth school closures and lockdowns would no longer be possible.

Crucially, the budget of the coming government is in the hands of the FDP. FDP leader Christian Lindner will be able to exercise control over the budget as the country's next finance minister and ensure that no additional money flows into the health sector. In their coalition agreement, the traffic light coalition partners have committed themselves to reactivating the debt brake, which was suspended at the start of the pandemic in order to keep businesses open and profits flowing.

Lauterbach is a right-wing social democrat who has consistently prioritised the profits of big business and the banks over his scientific expertise. He only joined

the SPD in 2001, after quitting the Christian Democratic Union. He continues to maintain close relations with his former political allies and is on friendly terms, for example, with the CDU right-winger Wolfgang Bosbach.

Among the first well-wishers after his appointment was Markus Söder, the premier of the state of Bavaria and leader of the Christian Social Union. He wrote on Twitter, “This is a good choice. Congratulations #Karl Lauterbach! Looking forward to good cooperation in serious times.” The evening before, Söder already declared on the TV programme “Anne Will” that Lauterbach would make a good health minister and often shared his own standpoint. The outgoing health minister, Jens Spahn (CDU), also immediately congratulated him. Spahn has been in regular contact with Lauterbach for months.

During the period of the former SPD-Green coalition government (1998-2005) and since, Lauterbach played an important role in dismantling the country’s social system—based on equivalent payments to social funds by the employer and employee—and helped privatise parts of the health system. He was a member of the Council of Experts for the Assessment of Developments in the Health Care System and the so-called Rürup Commission (Commission to Investigate Sustainability in the Financing of Social Security Systems), which advised several federal governments. In the process, he was involved in the development of the fee-per-case system, which has contributed significantly to the decline of the country’s hospitals.

Far from being an opponent of two-class medicine, Lauterbach encouraged such a system in his role on the supervisory board of Rhön-Klinikum AG from 2001 to 2013. When the media revealed that employees of the Rhön Group were paid miserable wages and subject to extreme exploitation, Lauterbach kept silent. The listed company, comprising 54 hospitals and 35 medical care centres, generated a turnover of 2.32 billion euros in 2009.

Two years ago, when the Bertelsmann Foundation called for half of all clinics in Germany to be closed, Lauterbach supported the demand. On June 4, 2019, he tweeted, “Everyone knows that we should close at least one third, or even one half of all clinics in Germany.”

Lauterbach has also noticeably toned down his criticism of the government’s pandemic policy since

the SPD emerged as the party with the most votes in September’s general election. A key experience for parents and teachers was his advocacy of open schools after the autumn break. In mid-November, when schools across the country were opened at the request of the business community and infection figures shot up, he announced, “We will manage to keep the schools open,” thereby sabotaging parents’ initiatives and teachers seeking to combat the pandemic.

When he now promises to allow “no more cuts in the health care sector,” even the fulfilment of this promise—unlikely as it is—would be completely unacceptable. The country is already in a state of emergency, intensive care units are overflowing and the spectre of triage is a deadly reality. In this situation, maintaining the status quo means unprecedented levels of dead.

Despite the appointment of Lauterbach the new government, will quickly come into conflict with broad layers of the population. In his first speeches and interviews after his appointment, Lauterbach insisted that schools will remain open despite the horrific toll of the pandemic. The government’s “profits before lives” policy can only be stopped by the independent mobilisation of the working class.



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