Death toll rises in Germany even before Omicron variant takes hold

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19 December 2021

Daily COVID-19 infection numbers in Germany continue to average 50,000, about twice as high as at the peak of the second wave. At the same time, the death toll is rising. With about 2,000 coronavirus deaths per week, more people are currently dying than at the peak of the third wave in spring 2021. A total of 107,639 people have succumbed to the virus since early 2020. More than 4,800 coronavirus patients currently require intensive care, which is already pushing hospitals to the limit of their ability to respond.

The situation threatens to worsen with the spread of the even more infectious Omicron variant. For the week before last, the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) says the Omicron variant accounted for 1.6 percent of all new infections in Germany. Due to considerable reporting delays in the identification of coronavirus variants and the explosive spread of Omicron, the actual figures are likely to be many times higher.

The particularly high infectivity of Omicron means a very large number of unreported cases is to be expected, which are rapidly increasing unnoticed. An article on news website Zeit Online, for example, speaks of an "invisible wall" of infections and, supported by data from the RKI as well as district and state authorities, shows that an incidence rate of almost 1,000 per 100,000 inhabitants will be reached by the end of the year at the current rate of spread.

The extent of this exponential increase is already evident in Denmark, Norway and the UK, where the numbers reported are exploding. In Denmark, Omicron could become the dominant variant as early as this week. Currently, the number of daily Omicron infections there is doubling every two to three days with 500 hospitalizations per day expected by New Year's Eve. Extrapolated to Germany, that would be more than 7,000.

In Norway—a country with a population of barely 5 million—the health authorities expect up to 300,000 infections and 200 hospital admissions per day at the end of the year. In the UK, daily infection numbers are already at an all-time high of nearly 90,000. Case numbers are doubling every two days, and, even in a best-case scenario, two to three times as many people would need to be hospitalized daily by Christmas. By April, if the current rate holds, half the population could be infected.

The same development threatens all other European countries. According to scientists, Omicron will soon dominate infections in Germany. "Omicron has such speed that the variant could account for half the cases in Germany in two and a half weeks," Michael Meyer-Hermann, a modeller and head of the Systems Immunology Department at the Helmholtz Centre for Infection Research, told *Der Spiegel* .

The Omicron wave comes at a time when the situation is already catastrophic based on the spread of the Delta variant. Death rates are rising, hospitals are at a breaking point, treatment capacities are being exceeded regionally and the RKI had anticipated a further increase in serious illnesses and deaths even without Omicron.

Despite knowing the enormous dangers, the German government is refusing to take the necessary measures to contain and eliminate the virus. Health Minister Karl Lauterbach said Friday that "we have to assume that the Omicron wave we are facing, which I don't think we can prevent, will be a massive challenge for our hospitals, for our intensive care units, but also for society as a whole."

Even if Omicron infections were slightly milder this would "not make a difference," he added. The tremendous growth of infections would cause more

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deaths even with a milder progression to the illness, he said, adding that one must “prepare for a challenge that we have not had before in this form.”

Nevertheless, Lauterbach did not announce any additional protective measures. This is not surprising. The parties of the “traffic light” coalition—Social Democrats (SPD), Greens and Liberal Democrats (FDP)—ended the legal designation of an “epidemic emergency” in November, something Lauterbach also voted for in the Bundestag (federal parliament). Since then, he has spoken out several times in favour of keeping schools and businesses open and has defended the new Infection Protection Act, which legally rules out hard lockdowns.

Lauterbach’s primary health policy action has been to make appeals to get vaccinated. Yet even the government's announcement to accelerate the vaccination campaign is a farce. Less than 70 percent have been vaccinated twice in Germany, leaving almost 25 million people without any protection. Only 27.5 percent, or 22,923,853, people have received the urgently needed booster vaccination. Millions of people desperate to obtain a vaccination appointment are being put off until January or February due to insufficient capacity.

Lauterbach and all the bourgeois parties are pursuing a strategy of herd immunity. The extremely limited mitigation measures serve at most to somewhat flatten the increase in infections in the short term before they then break out all the more aggressively—potentially on the basis of new, dangerous virus variants. This is exactly what is currently happening with Omicron.

The fact that a different path is possible is clearly demonstrated by the example of China, which is the only country that continues to adhere to a Zero COVID strategy. The country, with a population of 1.4 billion, has been able to keep the total number of deaths below 5,000. Only three more deaths have been added since April 2020.

Targeted lockdowns, the isolation of infected individuals, mass testing and contact tracing have made it possible to contain outbreaks in metropolitan areas such as Chongqing (population 20 million) within 15 days and then largely lift restrictions.

The German government’s policy, on the other hand, places capitalist profit maximization above human lives and therefore sees the necessary closure of schools and non-essential production as unacceptable. This course is supported by all parties—from the Left Party to the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD). The traffic light coalition, which presents itself as a “progressive government,” has adopted and intensified the murderous herd immunity policy of the previous grand coalition of the SPD and Christian Democrats.

The supposedly left-wing parties in particular play a key role in enforcing these policies. With a current seven-day incidence rate of 870, Thuringia, governed by the Left Party, is the state with the highest infection rate. Leading representatives of the Left Party, such as Sahra Wagenknecht, have downplayed the entire pandemic and agitated against protective measures in the style of far-right coronavirus deniers.

To stop the murderous profits-before-lives policy, workers and youth must organize independently of all the bourgeois parties and the trade unions. Wednesday, December 22 at 8 p.m., the Network of Safe Education Action Committees is holding an online meeting to discuss the political and organisational tasks needed to fight the pandemic. Register here and also invite your colleagues, friends and acquaintances.

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