

German government looks to shorten quarantine time despite Omicron and rising infections

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Although the number of coronavirus tests over the holidays was significantly lower, and health departments only reported a fraction of cases to the Robert Koch Institute (RKI), the 7-day incidence level rose again in the last six days. On Tuesday, it officially stood at 239.9 per 100,000 inhabitants. The RKI reported 30,561 new infections and 356 additional deaths.

In fact, the figures are many times higher. Before the beginning of the new year, Health Minister Karl Lauterbach (Social Democratic Party, SPD) explained that the real data is “probably two to three times higher [than] the incidence rates we are recording currently.” With a value between 460 and 700, the incidence level is thus already far above the previous peak value of the “fourth wave.”

In addition, there is the massive spread of the even more infectious Omicron variant. Since 15 November, the RKI has officially recorded over 30,000 infections of this variant. On Monday alone, 3,524 more people were infected with Omicron, an increase of 13 percent over the previous day. Nationwide, the variant already accounts for almost one-fifth of infections. However, due to the low genetic sequencing rate in Germany, the number of unreported cases is much higher.

A look at the pandemic in neighbouring European countries and internationally shows the explosive nature of the Omicron wave. In Denmark, one of the first countries to be hit by Omicron, the 7-day incidence level is currently 2,505. In France, where Omicron has become the predominant variant in recent days, the incidence level is 1,665.

In the UK, the numbers are also exploding, reaching new highs every day. On Friday alone, there were 190,000 cases in one day. Hospital admissions are at their highest levels since January. In the US, there is currently

an almost vertical rise in the number of cases: Within 24 hours, there were 440,000 new infections—more than twice as many as at the peak of the pandemic so far.

In Germany, the situation in hospitals is already dire. The adjusted hospitalisation rate is about seven, which corresponds to 5,000 to 6,000 hospitalisations per week.

The number of patients receiving intensive care continues to exceed 4,000. This threatens to increase significantly with the Omicron variant and to rupture hospital capacities. The RKI estimates the risk to the health of all those not triple-vaccinated as “high” to “very high.” This currently applies to over 60 percent of the population.

The ruling class knows what a disaster the spread of Omicron will bring. A “very high burden of disease from Omicron is to be expected,” according to the latest paper from the Conference of State Prime Ministers. The “sharply rising numbers of infections and their consequences” could thereby “reach a level that would restrict the functioning of critical infrastructure (KRITIS, including hospitals, police, fire brigades, emergency services, telecommunications, electricity and water supply and the corresponding logistics).”

In its first statement, the federal government’s expert council on COVID-19 warned that the high incidence of infection meant “a relevant part of the population will be simultaneously ill and/or in quarantine.”

Instead of taking the necessary measures to protect the health and lives of hundreds of thousands, the ruling class is responding with regulations that do everything to keep workers at work, enabling the maximising of profits.

For example, Health Minister Karl Lauterbach (Social Democrats) is planning to shorten the quarantine period. At the next federal-state meeting on Friday there will “definitely be new decisions, because we have to think

about how to change the quarantine regulation,” Lauterbach explained in an interview with broadcaster RTL/ntv on Sunday evening.

Last week, the US government reduced the quarantine period from 10 to only five days. On Sunday, France followed suit and reduced quarantine for fully vaccinated infected persons to seven days and, for those with a negative rapid test, down to even five. For fully vaccinated contacts, quarantine will be waived completely.

The measures will further fuel the already massive spread of Omicron. Since the beginning of the pandemic, it has been known that infected people can transmit the virus even if they display no symptoms.

Serious scientists castigate the measures. Berlin microbiologist and global health expert Timo Ulrichs told rbb-Inforadio he was “looking with concern” at the government parties’ plans to shorten the quarantine period. “If we end quarantine too early, people may still be contagious and pass on the virus in the final phase—and maybe we shouldn’t do that,” he said.

Federal and state governments are pursuing a deliberate policy of mass infection. After the Christmas holidays, schools are starting back with in-person teaching with full class sizes. This week, pupils in Berlin, Brandenburg, Hamburg, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Rhineland-Palatinate, Saarland, Saxony and Thuringia must return to school. The remaining federal states of Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria, Bremen, Hesse, Lower Saxony, North Rhine-Westphalia, Saxony-Anhalt and Schleswig-Holstein will follow next week.

“We must do everything we can to keep schools open,” wrote Education Minister Bettina Stark-Watzinger (Liberal Democratic Party, FDP) on Twitter. Face-to-face teaching was “a question of equal opportunities,” and she cynically wished all pupils, parents and teachers a “good and safe start.” Indeed, returning to overcrowded classrooms without air filters is a recipe for mass infection. This is not about “equal opportunities” but about keeping children in schools so that their parents can be forced to work.

A look at the stock markets shows in whose interest such policies are being implemented. At over 16,000 points, Germany’s DAX stock index is approaching a new all-time high in the new year. While the majority of the population faces income losses and layoffs and has had to risk life and health at work, the top 10 percent continue to enrich themselves from the pandemic and mass deaths.

The murderous profits-before-lives policy underlines that the fight against the pandemic requires a struggle against the capitalist profit system and its political representatives. The working class must intervene in the political arena as an independent force and take the fight to end the pandemic into its own hands. It must be based on the following principles formulated by the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) at the turn of the year in its “Open Letter to the Working Class”:

1. The current policy of “herd immunity,” which allows the limitless spread of COVID-19 among the population, must be rejected. Instead, the implementation of a new strategy aimed at the elimination and eradication of SARS-CoV-2 is required.

2. Containment measures must be guided by public health needs. The protection of human life and the safety of the population must have absolute and unconditional priority over any corporate financial interests. The costs of fighting the pandemic—including the payment of wages and salaries, compensation for small business owners, comprehensive medical care for the sick and payments to survivors—must be borne by big business. There also needs to be a 100 percent tax on the pandemic profits made by large investors through the rise in share prices.

3. The fight against the pandemic must be waged on a global scale. The pandemic can only be stopped if SARS-CoV-2 is eliminated in all countries. Workers in Germany and throughout Europe must demand that their colleagues in less developed countries be given the necessary vaccines free of charge.



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