

# Students in Austria strike against government's herd immunity policies

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In more than 100 schools across the country, pupils went on strike Tuesday against the homicidal herd immunity policies of the conservative Austrian Peoples Party (ÖVP) and Green Party coalition government. In view of the rapid spread of the Omicron variant and daily new record infection figures, the government has openly acknowledged its policy of deliberate mass infection. With the return to face-to-face teaching and compulsory oral final examinations in high schools, this inhumane course is being pushed even further.

In the capital, Vienna, many students gathered in protests at several schools. In the Ottakring district, about 150 pupils protested on Schuhmeierplatz. With posters and chants, they demanded a safe pandemic policy and the suspension of the oral exam. Under the hashtags #WirStreiken (#WeAreStriking), #NichtMitUns (#NotWithUs) and #DurchseuchungOhneUns (#MassInfectionNotWithUs), the students documented their activities and spread their demands.

Around 100 students also demonstrated against the oral examination in front of the Bundesrealgymnasium in Linz. Participants from the graduating classes were supported by pupils from the 6th and 7th grades, as well as pupils from other schools. In Bregenz, about 100 students from the upper school protested.

During protests in Salzburg, student representatives announced that they would go on strike again next week if the government did not respond to the students' demands. In Klagenfurt, pupils also took part in the strike, although both the Federal Pupils' Representation and the Carinthia Regional Pupils' Representation had spoken out against the strike.

In addition to the Aktion kritischer SchülerInnen (AKS, Critical Pupils Action), which is close to the Austrian Social Democratic Party, SPÖ), numerous

school representatives supported and called for protests. Some limited their protest to demanding that the oral exam not be compulsory for graduation, which is absolutely justified in view of the pandemic, as well as because of inadequate preparation.

In the last two years, the oral exam has been voluntary. However, ÖVP Education Minister Martin Polaschek, one of the most aggressive advocates of a radical pandemic policy in the cabinet of Chancellor Karl Nehammer (also ÖVP), now wants to make it compulsory again.

An open letter from about 300 student representatives had appealed to the federal government for sufficient protective measures for Austria's schools. It says: "The pandemic is now spreading over a considerable period of our lives and is placing an increasing burden on us. Your task would be to counteract this development. Instead, you are exacerbating it through your policies. You are breaking the camel's back. This can't go on any longer. #NotWithUs!"

The letter demands not only fair conditions for the final exams and an increase in staff at schools, but first and foremost a "clear no to the deliberate infection of children and young people," as well as implementation of safety measures and awareness campaigns. Already, 30,000 pupils have signed the petition "gerechte Matura" (fair school-leaving exams) condemning the plans of the education minister.

But the ÖVP and the Greens are willing to impose face-to-face teaching under any conditions. Education Minister Polaschek recently cold-bloodedly declared that the current coronavirus figures "do not really matter" for the start of school.

Katharina Reich, the head of the COVID Crisis Coordination (Gecko), freely admitted that there would be widespread infection of the population. She

complained that Durchseuchung (endemic contamination) was a “negative word” that caused fear. Health Minister Wolfgang Mückstein (Greens) spoke of a “paradigm shift” towards an open strategy of allowing the virus to become endemic.

The indifference of Polascheck, Reich, Mückstein and the other government representatives to the health and lives of teachers, pupils and parents is also shown by their handling of the PCR tests for pupils, which are supposed to make schools safe.

The original plan was for a totally inadequate two tests per week per student. But now, not even that is being implemented. Due to “technical difficulties,” only one test per week is evaluated.

Nevertheless, even this far too low number of tests is already providing an insight into the dramatic incidence of infections in schools.

In Vienna alone, 229 classes at 224 schools had to be closed due to massive outbreaks. In addition, 146 kindergartens were partially closed and three were completely closed. In Tyrol, 190 school classes are undertaking distance learning because of extremely high infection rates.

Since the end of the partial lockdown in mid-December and the spread of the highly contagious Omicron variant, infection numbers have been shooting up rapidly. On Tuesday, the nationwide seven-day incidence rate reached a new record high of 1,288 per 100,000 inhabitants, according to the Agency for Health and Food Safety (AGES). In Salzburg, it was as high as 2,187. Tyrol and Vienna also reported new records with 1,967 and 1,737, respectively. Even in Burgenland, the province with the lowest incidence, the figure now stands at over 700.

The school strike in Austria is part of a growing international movement against the policy of deliberate mass infection. Everywhere, governments are keeping schools and factories open to maintain the flow of profits to big business. But resistance to this is growing worldwide.

In protest against the high risks involved in reopening schools after the winter holidays, students in Greece occupied 350 schools. Local protest rallies by teachers also took place there during the first week of school.

In Germany, 13-year-old Yasmin from North Rhine-Westphalia received a wave of sympathy and support. The student refused to attend classes in an unsafe

classroom, and instead followed lessons at a desk in the cold schoolyard. Several student representatives in Germany also recently called for a school strike.

In France, thousands of teachers went on strike and demonstrated January 13 against the Macron government’s herd immunity policies and unsafe conditions in schools. According to the French teachers’ unions, 75 percent of primary school teachers and 62 percent of secondary school teachers took part in the strike. About half of schools remained completely closed. Strikes are planned again this Thursday.

A strong strike and protest movement against keeping schools open is also developing in the US. In numerous metropolitan areas—Chicago, San Francisco and Oakland, California—educators are organising spontaneous walkouts, sickouts and strikes to end face-to-face classes. In doing so, they are opposing the trade unions, which, as in Europe and Austria, vehemently defend opening schools.

Students, teachers and parents must build independent rank-and-file committees in schools and workplaces, working together to stop unsafe face-to-face teaching, and prepare a globally coordinated strike movement. This is the only way to stop the policy of deliberate mass infection in the interests of the banks and corporations and to develop and implement a strategy to eliminate COVID-19.



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