

Omicron sweeping through workplaces in Germany

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A wave of the Omicron variant of the coronavirus is sweeping through workplaces and factories in Germany. Workers are paying a heavy price. The death toll from the virus in Germany is nearing 120,000. One hundred twenty thousand people have died unnecessarily and too soon, leaving behind sons and daughters, grandchildren, partners, friends, colleagues. Hundreds of thousands more who survive the epidemic risk the chronic effects of Long COVID.

Since the pandemic began, the “system-relevant” industries—health care, social services, schools, transportation and logistics—have been particularly hard hit by coronavirus infections. Since the outbreak of the Omicron variant in November, health insurers have been registering increasingly severe outbreaks in private-sector companies, in automotive manufacturing, automotive engineering, metal processing, plastics and rubber production, and in mechanical and industrial engineering.

From the beginning of the pandemic onward, few figures on COVID-19 infections made their way into public view. The economy is to be kept running so that profits continue to flow. That is why schools are kept open while the pandemic is allowed to rage unchecked. From the factories filter only single stories, however typical and telling, that enable a glimpse of the virus’ spread.

On January 20, when new daily infections in Germany exceeded 100,000 for the first time, the business newspaper *Handelsblatt* published a survey of several DAX-listed corporations and smaller companies, concluding that “companies are feeling the increase in infection figures pretty much everywhere—albeit with varying degrees of intensity.”

At MN Maschinenbau in Saxony, for example, the sickness rate was rising steadily, and at the end of January, nine out of every 100 employees were absent. Engine manufacturer MTU noted a “significant increase in infection figures” since the beginning of the year, and the situation was similar at chipmaker Infineon. According to the report, several companies are keeping reserve staff on standby and hiring additional temporary workers to make up for coronavirus absences. This is the case at BMW, for example, as well as at laser specialist Trumpf in Austria and Switzerland.

Carmaker Opel in Rüsselsheim is also hiring “a mid-three-digit number” of temporary workers through Adecco, *WirtschaftsWoche* reported. The automaker, now owned by Stellantis, cut several thousand jobs since it was acquired by PSA; 2,100 employees have

been terminated just since the beginning of 2020. Now, however, workers are being hired to compensate for “shortfalls due to the Omicron wave,” as explained by Opel management. In Rüsselsheim, more people have contracted the coronavirus since the Omicron wave (i.e., since November) than in the whole of last year.

At Volkswagen in Wolfsburg, news reached the public on February 8 that the paint shop was ordering “renewed shift cancellations” as a result of clusters of workers calling in sick due to coronavirus. At VW, it is particularly difficult to obtain information about colleagues who have fallen ill.

All reports indicate that an unusually high number of workers have contracted SARS-CoV-2 since the beginning of 2022. According to a study by the insurer AOK, more than 130,000, or 5.5 percent, of the 2.4 million workers insured by AOK Baden-Württemberg had sick leave due to a COVID-19 diagnosis between March 2020 and November 2021. Of these, nearly 20 percent fell ill just in the month of November 2021. Without doubt many more workers have contracted the disease since then, in December 2021 and January 2022.

In the energy industry, enough workers are falling ill that management is training additional staff, bringing back workers and those recently retired, a spokesman for the German Association of Energy and Water Industries (BDEW) told the news portal ntv.de.

The situation in the slaughterhouses is dire. New coronavirus infections have been on the rise for weeks, especially in the cutting area, where workers toil shoulder-to-shoulder. These are ideal conditions for the virus to spread and workers can do virtually nothing to protect themselves.

Here, too, the outbreaks are not made public by alarmed health authorities or the representative NGG trade union, but through the complaints of entrepreneurs afraid for their profits. For example, on January 24, the Federation of Livestock and Meat Producers’ Associations (VEZG) complained of difficulty meeting the quota for slaughtered pigs because “due to a sharp rise in coronavirus infections, there was a shortage of staff in the slaughterhouses, especially in cutting.”

The Aalen slaughterhouse in the state of Baden-Württemberg has been closed since early February due to an undisclosed number of coronavirus infections. There are also new coronavirus outbreaks at the Bamberg slaughterhouse and the Danish Crown cattle slaughterhouse in Husum. As announced on February 1, 120 employees had been infected with the coronavirus at the Husum

plant.

In the first summer of the pandemic in 2020, Tönnies slaughterhouses in the district of Gütersloh became notorious as coronavirus hotspots. Over 1,500 employees were infected with the coronavirus onsite. At the time, the Social Democrats (SPD) passed a new “Occupational Health and Safety Control Act,” prompting both the owner, Clemens Tönnies, and the district and state governments to promise to remedy the miserable working and living conditions that led to the outbreak.

These were but empty words. Today there are once again reports of coronavirus outbreaks at Tönnies. This was reported on February 2 by the ZDF magazine *Frontal*, which likewise documented life-threatening violations of occupational health and safety and illegal dismissals in the event of illness.

Omicron is raging particularly rampant in the public transport sector. Cities such as Berlin, Leipzig, Hamburg, Augsburg, Chemnitz, Frankfurt am Main are trimming schedules and shutting down routes because of the persistently high level of sick leave.

In the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, the cities of Hamm, Remscheid, Mönchengladbach, Herne and Castrop-Rauxel, among others, have done likewise in recent days, and the city of Bielefeld has suspended night bus service. In the Rhine-Main region, public transportation in Wiesbaden and Frankfurt has been reduced for days. In Wiesbaden, school bus routes are also affected, resulting in crowding—and increased risk of infection—on the buses still running.

On February 7, *Redaktions Netzwerk Deutschland* (RND) reported on a “cross-industry flash poll” conducted by the German Chamber of Industry and Commerce. Of 370 entrepreneurs, one in four described their current staff shortages as “considerable.” Another 4 percent rated their understaffing as “critical.” Thirty-one businesses in the health care sector said the impact was “significant,” while among transportation and logistics companies, the figure was as high as 36 percent. Virtually all businesses expect the situation to worsen.

The RND introduced this information with the sentence: “The German economy is suffering from the consequences of the current coronavirus wave.” This entrepreneurs’ lament was combined with a demand to the government to shorten quarantine periods. This shows with complete clarity that profit maximization, not public health protection, is at the heart of such considerations.

In all of this, no one asks how the workers are faring. According to official figures, more than 11 million people have been infected with SARS-CoV-2 so far, 4 million of them just since the beginning of 2022. In Germany last month, around 5,000 people, 175 per day, paid for the virus with their lives.

Yet everything could have been different. If scientific advice had been heeded from the start of the pandemic and a global strategy had been adopted to eliminate the virus, as was done, for example, in the eradication of measles and smallpox, then several million people worldwide could still be alive today.

China has shown the way: Unlike most governments, China is pursuing a strategy that repeatedly eliminates the virus through a combination of vaccination, systematic testing, contact tracing and temporary shutdowns. The world’s most populous country, with

1.4 billion people, has recorded fewer than 5,000 deaths and just under 100,000 cases of the disease.

Even today, it is still possible to bring the pandemic under control and defeat the deadly disease internationally. However, this is only possible by taking up a fight against the new coalition government in Berlin and their counterparts in all other countries, who are in the process of deliberately mass infecting schools and all of society in the interest of capital. The focus is not on the lives of the people, but on the profit of the capitalist corporations.

Unions are also an integral part of this conspiracy to force workers to labour under life-threatening pandemic conditions. They, too, systematically conceal coronavirus outbreaks in the factories and downplay their consequences.

The chairman of IG Metall union, Jörg Hofmann, stated that the facts “do not support shutting down industry to reduce the number of coronavirus infections. ... Shutting down industry would have the most severe economic consequences.”

From the start, the service sector union Verdi stated on its website that becoming infected with disease at work is part of the “general risk of life.” And the teachers’ union GEW has continuously pushed to keep schools open at all costs.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (the Socialist Equality Party in Germany) and the *World Socialist Web Site* call on workers to reject this and to fight the pandemic by organizing independently of the unions into rank-and-file committees.

Resistance to the government’s mass infection policy is also developing in schools. The youth organization of the Fourth International, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), issued a statement calling for the establishment of independent rank-and-file committees.

The statement says: “A social system that walks over corpses for profits and destroys the health and future of entire generations must be abolished and replaced by a system that gives priority to life over profits. The struggle against the pandemic, like the struggle against social inequality and war, is at its core a struggle against capitalism and for socialism.”

We call on all our readers to participate in this struggle. Write to us about your experiences with the pandemic so that we at the WSWS can expose the true extent of mass infection.



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