

Omicron rages in German hospitals and nursing homes

Markus Salzmann**14 February 2022**

Rapidly rising infection levels are having an increasingly serious impact on the situation in health and care facilities.

On Friday alone, more than 206,000 people in Germany became infected and 196 died. At the same time, the German government is preparing to lift the remaining, already completely inadequate, protective measures. Like governments across Europe, the federal coalition under Chancellor Olaf Scholz (Social Democratic Party, SPD) is deliberately accepting mass illness and death.

Massive outbreaks are already commonplace. In a nursing home in Heidelberg, 34 residents and two employees recently tested positive for coronavirus. In a care facility in Lichtenfels, Bavaria, 75 people have been infected. In addition, 42 residents and 33 employees have tested positive, according to the operator.

In Schleswig-Holstein, a coronavirus outbreak was reported in a retirement home in the municipality of Tarp, with 65 residents and 19 employees becoming infected. In a facility in Wahlstedt, 54 of the 89 residents and 30 of 39 employees were infected. Here, the outbreak was caused by the significantly more contagious Omicron subvariant BA.2. According to the Robert Koch Institute (RKI), 20 percent of infections in Germany are now due to this variant.

In a care facility in Horb (Baden-Württemberg), 15 residents and 10 staff members have been infected in a new outbreak. A few weeks ago, nine residents died following an outbreak. The list could go on and on.

The numerous infections lead to an enormous loss of staff, which further aggravates the staff shortage that has been rampant in the nursing professions for years.

In Thuringia, according to the Ministry of Social Affairs, this is no longer achieved in 40 percent of

facilities. In 129 of 328 homes, the staff quota is below 50 percent, as reported by the Deutsche Presse-Agentur. Among them are 49 facilities that employ only between 30 and 45 percent specialised staff. Many facilities are not accepting new residents due to a lack of staff. According to broadcaster rbb, several facilities in Cottbus, Brandenburg and the surrounding area have already done so.

The situation is similar in hospitals. At the Bonhoeffer Hospital in Neubrandenburg, for example, one in 10 employees is absent because of a coronavirus infection or is in quarantine. Only urgent emergencies are currently admitted there. At the Südstadt-klinikum in Rostock, so many doctors and nurses are absent due to COVID-19 that one ward has already been closed. According to the medical director, there are plans to close another ward.

The situation in Berlin is equally dire. Here, the hospitalisation incidence rate is over 25 per 100,000 inhabitants, which means it has risen by 5 points within one week. This is also associated with a strong increase in bed occupancy in normal wards. The state-owned Vivantes hospitals are currently treating 331 COVID-19 patients, 53 more than a week ago (as of Friday). At the same time, the sickness rate among staff is twice as high as usual.

The picture is similar at the Charité, which cares for most coronavirus patients in the capital. According to the German Red Cross (DRK), its hospitals also do not expect the situation to ease in the short term.

Nevertheless, the SPD-Left Party-Green Berlin Senate (state executive) is pushing ahead with its reopening course. The SPD, the Greens and the Left Party have decided on generous relaxations of protective measures for large events, which came into force on February 12. Others are to follow from

February 19.

Berlin Mayor Franziska Giffey (SPD) said that the Senate was currently consulting with virologist Christian Drosten on an “exit strategy” from the coronavirus measures. Drosten had recently claimed there was no alternative to the unscrupulous herd immunity policies of the federal and state governments.

While the governing parties continue to push the policy of deliberate mass infection, even the existing vaccination options are being cut back on cost grounds. Plans are currently being discussed to close five state-run vaccination centres. This would reduce capacity in vaccination centres from 17,000 vaccinations to only 3,600. Of 23 mobile vaccination teams, only 12 are to be retained.

The emerging discussion about compulsory vaccination for medical and nursing professions must also be seen against this background. More and more politicians and media outlets are running up a storm against the introduction of compulsory vaccination, according to which, from March 15, employees in hospitals and nursing homes must be fully vaccinated and otherwise are no longer allowed to work in those settings.

It is not possible to stop the pandemic through vaccination alone. Nevertheless, mass vaccination is imperative, especially in the health sector. As outbreaks have shown time and again, if an infected person works with elderly or sick people in a home or hospital, the consequences can be disastrous. Therefore, the requirement that they be vaccinated is legitimate and necessary. Anyone who refuses to be inoculated despite having access to a vaccine will inevitably not be allowed to work in these areas.

Numerous media outlets and politicians are now arguing that compulsory vaccination would lead to mass layoffs in nursing homes and further aggravate the staffing situation. Bavaria’s head of government Markus Söder (Christian Social Union, CSU) had announced that there would be “generous transitional arrangements,” which is tantamount to refusing to implement the law.

Saxony’s state premier Michael Kretschmer (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) has also pleaded for a postponement of compulsory vaccination. The trade unions are also largely in favour of this course. Frank Werneke, head of the Verdi union, warned last

year against stigmatising unvaccinated people in this context.

This argumentation is mendacious and reactionary. In fact, more than 85 percent of medical and nursing staff are already fully vaccinated, which is well above the general vaccination rate. In Rhineland-Palatinate, the rate is over 92 percent. In some cities it is over 95 percent.

That there is a significant proportion of vaccination sceptics among nurses and doctors is simply not true. The fact that employees are still not vaccinated is usually because there is no systematic vaccination campaign. Many auxiliary workers in the care sector live under precarious conditions, have a migration background, and lack German language skills.

Moreover, it is not because of compulsory vaccination that dismissals occur, but exactly the opposite. The complete inaction of those responsible has led to thousands of dismissals and career changes by nurses in the last two years. For decades, public health care has been privatised and cut to the bone. The pandemic has added the constant threat of infection and its possible consequences to the mix of poor pay and miserable working conditions.

Health workers must reject the right-wing campaign against compulsory vaccination. Moreover, to prevent a collapse of the health system and the permanent overburdening of health workers, it is necessary to oppose the herd immunity policies of the establishment parties.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact