

German government ends pandemic measures

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Just as a steep rise in coronavirus cases is leading to the highest incidence levels since the pandemic began, and the number of severe cases is also increasing, the German government is ending all protective measures. The previous Infection Protection Act, which authorized the remaining protective measures, expired on Saturday. The day before, a new Infection Protection Act was passed in the Bundestag (parliament), which will apply until September 23.

However, the new law only provides for so-called basic protection. It is limited to obliging mask wearing in nursing homes, hospitals, local and long-distance public transport, as well as a testing obligation in clinics, nursing homes, day care centres and schools. Even in retail stores, masks are no longer mandatory. Abolition of the isolation rules for infected persons has not been decided, but is still under discussion.

Stricter measures are now only possible in so-called hotspot areas. However, the point at which a region is considered a hotspot does not depend on fixed values, but must be determined by the relevant state parliament. Nevertheless, even in hotspot areas, far-reaching protective measures are no longer permitted as a result of the new legislation. The possible regulations are limited to mandatory FFP2 masks in other areas, social distancing of 1.5 metres indoors, and 3G (allowing admittance for persons who have recovered from COVID, are fully vaccinated or with a negative test result) and 2G (persons who have recovered from COVID or fully vaccinated persons) regulations—all completely inadequate measures that have not stopped the current wave.

The individual German states are also free to adopt transitional regulations until April 2 after the expiration of the Infection Protection Act. However, these may only be limited to mandatory mask wearing, as well as 2G and 3G regulations, but not contact restrictions or limits on the number of participants at large events.

In addition to the Infection Control Act, the Coronavirus Occupational Safety and Health Regulation also expires on April 19. Here, too, only “basic protection” is to apply going forward, consisting of social distancing, wearing a mask and ventilation. This eliminates the 3G regulation in the workplace, the provision of two free tests per week for each worker, and the requirement for employers to provide work-from-home options for their employees.

Numerous government officials justified the end of the

protections by claiming the pandemic was over. Liberal Democrat (FDP) health expert Christine Aschenberg-Dugnus called it an “important step toward normality.” Federal Justice Minister Marco Buschmann (FDP) declared on Twitter, “Soon [there will be] virtually no restrictions in everyday life ... because the coronavirus situation is manageable. This removes the justification for many serious measures.”

Health Minister Karl Lauterbach (Social Democratic Party, SPD) was particularly cynical during the debate in the Bundestag, saying, “As an epidemiologist, I would have wished we could have done more for those who are now at risk. But we have to consider the legal situation: The legal situation is this: we can’t continue to put the whole country under protection to safeguard a small group of those unwilling to be vaccinated and those who are not willing to go along with the measures.”

Who is Lauterbach trying to fool? The “legal situation” to end the measures was created by the coalition government itself, whose first official act in November was to phase out the legal designation of an “epidemic emergency.” If Lauterbach and other government representatives are now justifying the end of the measures on the grounds that the situation is “manageable” and that only “a small group of those unwilling to be vaccinated” is threatened, this is simply a lie.

The number of unvaccinated is not “small” either, but includes nearly 20 million. Most of them are not “unwilling” to be vaccinated, but simply have not been reached by the completely inadequate vaccination campaign. The unvaccinated also includes millions of children under the age of five, for whom there is still no official vaccination option.

Moreover, it is well known that vaccination—important as it is—only reduces the likelihood of a severe or fatal illness, but does not always prevent it. However, because the virus works to infect masses of people, there will still be a great many who suffer severe illness or die, even if the overall probability is lower.

Allowing the virus free rein also leads to the emergence of vaccine-resistant mutations that can evade vaccine protection. The emergence of the Omicron variant and its BA.2 subvariant illustrates this. The government is absolutely aware of the murderous consequences of its policy. It will be “the case that in many places, there will be precisely this overload [of hospitals],” Lauterbach predicted in his speech in the Bundestag.

Infection figures are already reaching new record levels every day. According to data from the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) on Friday, 297,845 people were newly infected with the virus within one day. That is 45,000 more daily cases than a week ago. The nationwide incidence rate rose by 55 from the previous day and now stands at 1,706 per 100,000 inhabitants. Both are the highest values since the start of the pandemic. Since the beginning of last week alone, 1.1 million new infections have already been recorded.

Across the country, the pandemic is running wild. A total of 390 of 411 districts have an incidence rate of over 1,000. In 158 districts, the incidence level is over 2,000 and in eight it is even over 3,000. However, since testing capacities and health departments are at their limit in many places, and contacts are essentially no longer being followed up, a high number of unrecorded cases must be assumed.

The number of severe outcomes is also rising sharply. On Friday alone, 2,097 people were hospitalised. The adjusted hospitalisation incidence rate is currently close to 15 per 100,000, which corresponds to 12,000 hospitalisations per week. Some 294 people had to be newly admitted to the ICU within one day, which means that currently about 2,300 coronavirus patients are being treated in the ICU. The national average for the proportion of free intensive care beds is already around the 10 percent mark, which is considered the cut-off point for the hospitals' ability to respond.

The number of deaths is particularly alarming. Between 200 and 300 people are dying every day. On Thursday alone, there were 278 deaths, and on Friday 226. Contrary to the government's narrative, it is not just the elderly who are being hit. Since the beginning of the pandemic, 57 children and young people between the ages of 0 and 19 have died. Currently, at least one child is added to the list of fatalities every week. For reasons of privacy, the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) does not disclose more precise details.

The spread of the virus in schools continues to fuel infection rates among children and adolescents. The 5- to 14-year-old and 15- to 35-year-old age groups have by far the highest incidence rates, at 3,004 and 2,475, respectively. For the last four weeks, 649 outbreaks have been reported at nursery schools. There have also been 426 outbreaks at schools in the last four weeks. And in both areas, follow-up reports for the last two weeks are still pending.

The high number of outbreaks in medical treatment facilities and nursing homes and homes for the elderly is particularly deadly. There were 510 outbreaks in nursing homes and homes for the elderly last week, and 196 in medical treatment facilities—23 more than the previous week. The current increase in hospitalisations, as well as the spread of Omicron subvariant BA.2—the most dangerous COVID variant to date, according to the study—will continue to drive up the death toll. In total, more than 126,000 people have already died from COVID-19 in Germany.

The vast majority of the population consider ending the measures to be sheer madness and reject this course. According to a Civey poll for *Der Spiegel*, 65 percent of the population is in favour of extending the coronavirus measures beyond March 20. Sixty percent favour a general vaccination requirement. But the ruling class is pushing the herd immunity policy to the extreme. There are objective reasons for this.

The first factor that runs through the entire pandemic policies of the ruling class is the maxim "profits before lives." Especially in view of the growing economic crisis and the developing opposition in the working class, nothing must interrupt production—and thus capitalist profit maximisation. For the ruling class, the scientifically necessary measures to contain the pandemic—first and foremost, the closure of schools and non-essential businesses—are unacceptable.

Another factor behind the murderous herd immunity policy is the drive to war. The German government is using Russia's attack on Ukraine, systematically provoked by NATO, to advance its own rearmament and war plans. Germany is increasingly taking a leading role in the NATO war offensive against Russia and is transporting more and more soldiers and war equipment to Eastern Europe. On Wednesday, the cabinet approved funding for the "Special Assets of the Bundeswehr," amounting to €100 billion, the largest rearmament drive since Hitler.

War and rearmament go hand in hand with capitulation to the pandemic. Wolfgang Ischinger, the former head of the Munich Security Conference, summed this up in his opening speech at this year's gathering with the statement: "We cannot simply postpone world politics. Security requirements do not abide by social distancing rules."

Both the war offensive and the official pandemic policies will continue to fuel social and political opposition among workers and youth. This needs a clear anti-capitalist perspective. The struggle against the pandemic, like the struggle against war and poverty, requires the mobilisation of the international working class on the basis of a socialist program.



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