

German states strike mask requirements in public transportation

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In Germany more than 100 people are dying daily from COVID-19, clinics are at capacity and a winter storm of coronavirus is brewing. In spite of this, German state governments are striking down the last protective measures against the unchecked spread of the virus.

Last Monday, federal and state health ministers met to conclude a common approach to mask requirements on public transportation. When those meeting failed to reach a consensus, several state governments unilaterally lifted the mask requirement on mass transit. Others announced their intention to soon follow suit.

On Thursday, Saxony-Anhalt lifted the mask requirement, as did Bavaria on Saturday. Bavarian Health Minister Klaus Holetschek (Christian Social Union, CSU) justified this by saying that the mask requirement was “no longer proportionate.”

The state government of Schleswig-Holstein announced that it would let the mask mandate expire at year’s end. The majority of federal states declared that they would extend the mask requirement until the end of the year, but not what would happen after that. There are many indications that other states will soon follow the example of Bavaria, Saxony-Anhalt and Schleswig-Holstein. The state coalition government in Bremen (Social Democrats-SPD, Left Party and Greens) had previously announced that it would end mandatory masking in March.

The state governments of Thuringia and Hesse did declare a desire to retain mask requirements for the time being. Yet they simultaneously stressed it would be difficult if it were abolished in the other federal states. Past experience has amply demonstrated that when one state repeals a measure, the others move to follow.

At the federal level, Finance Minister Christian Lindner, chairman of the liberal Free Democrats (FDP),

reacted to the Bavarian government’s decision by calling for the abolition of masking requirements throughout Germany: “Right decision ... to do away with the mask requirement in public transport. Hope that this decision sets a precedent throughout the country.”

Federal Minister of Health Karl Lauterbach (SPD) made an appeal to retain obligatory masking in local transit, but this was a lie. He himself played a leading role in drafting the current “Infection Protection Act,” which eliminated most mitigating measures and gave the states the power to abolish those remaining.

It is particularly telling that the unions support the abolition of masking requirements. In recent days, both major rail unions—the EVG and the GDL—spoke out in favor of a nationwide abolition of required masking on local and long-distance trains.

EVG chairman Martin Burkert told the major weekly *Der Spiegel* that wearing masks on trains should be voluntary. The current patchwork of rules is “simply no longer comprehensible,” he said.

GDL leader Claus Weselsky spoke similarly: “It certainly proved its worth during the hot phases of the pandemic and made sense at the time. Now it is starting to take on grotesque form because my colleagues are the only ones who are still obliged by their work to strictly adhere to it ... It’s enough at some point. We, as a railroad, are the only mode of transportation for which masks are still required on long-distance and commuter services.”

The unions’ support for the workplace infection of their members shows their anti-worker character. Throughout the pandemic, their goal has been to force workers back on the job, despite unsafe conditions, to keep profits rolling in. Now they are calling for the elimination of the last workplace protections.

Local and long-distance transport is the only sector where a mask requirement—and thus one of the last remaining protective measures—still applies. At the end of November, Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria, Hesse and Schleswig-Holstein lifted the isolation requirement for those infected. Rhineland-Palatinate followed suit at the beginning of December.

The lifting of obligatory masking ahead of the winter wave amounts to codifying viral death into law. Contrary to the general claim of politicians and the media, the virus has by no means become harmless, rather it remains extremely deadly.

About 110 people die from the virus every day in Germany. Ten thousand people are hospitalized every week. The number of coronavirus outbreaks is increasing in medical facilities as well as in nursing homes and homes for the elderly.

There were 191 outbreaks in medical facilities last week (compared to 119 the previous week) and 280 in nursing homes and homes for the elderly (compared to 269 the previous week). These coronavirus outbreaks resulted in 26 reported deaths in the medical facilities and 69 in the nursing homes. These numbers are bound to rise as the anticipated winter wave of coronavirus rolls over Germany.

A number of other respiratory diseases are also spreading due to the abolition of measures against coronavirus. As Lothar Wieler, president of the Robert Koch Institute (RKI), the federal institution responsible disease control and prevention, explained, “One notices at present that ever more people are catching the flu. That’s why I think there won’t be a pure Corona wave in the winter, rather multiple respiratory infections will spread in parallel.”

According to the RKI, the number of respiratory illnesses is “currently above the peak level of severe flu waves from previous years.” The current RKI report estimates the number of acute respiratory illnesses in the population totals around 9.5 million. According to internal evaluations of the health insurance provider DAK, more people had reported sick this November than in the previous three. Compared to November 2021, the number has doubled.

This is reflected in hospitals. According to the German Interdisciplinary Association for Intensive Care and Emergency Medicine (Divi), the number of vacant intensive care beds has fallen below 2,000 for

the first time since the pandemic began. As of Thursday last week, there were only 1,886 beds free. A year ago at the same time there were 2,250 and two years ago almost 4,000.

And the figures refer only to intensive care beds for adults. At the children’s hospitals, the situation is even more catastrophic. The spokesman for the Professional Association of Pediatric Doctors (BVKJ), Jakob Maske, told the broadcaster Deutschlandfunk: “It is the case at the moment that the health of children and adolescents and also their lives are fairly endangered.”

Seen as a whole, German clinics are on the verge of collapse. “We now have a very normal increase in infectious diseases, as we see every winter, and the systems are breaking down,” said Maske. Critically ill children, for example, are being transferred hundreds of kilometers from Berlin because there are no beds available in the capital.

The overloading of the health care system, which is now particularly acute, and the unchecked spread of the coronavirus and other infectious diseases are a consequence of the profits-before-lives policies of the ruling class. It is necessary to build an independent movement of the international working class with a socialist program to wrest public health from the drive for profit.



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