

Germany: Children's clinics on the brink of collapse while the government procures nuclear bombers

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Germany is currently experiencing a wave of COVID-19 deaths and other severe respiratory illnesses, pushing the country's children's hospitals to the brink of collapse. Just before Christmas, the German parliament decided it was better to spend taxpayers' money on procuring nuclear bombers. The decision throws a spotlight on the criminal policies of the ruling class.

On December 14, the Bundestag budget committee approved the purchase of 35 F-35 II fighter jets at a cost of €10 billion. On the same day, Europe's largest university hospital, the Charité, announced it would go into emergency operation. The children's wards were so overloaded that "for weeks doctors and nursing staff had to be withdrawn from normal wards to work the children's wards," according to the news outlet Deutsche Welle (DW). Despite "24/7 operation in all paediatric rescue units," "care could no longer be guaranteed," declared one Charité paediatrician.

According to a survey by the German Interdisciplinary Association for Intensive and Emergency Medicine (DIVI), every second hospital in Germany has already had to turn down children for paediatric intensive care. In normal children's wards, 43 of 110 paediatric clinics did not have a single bed available and ventilators are also in short supply. In addition, the children's clinics are plagued by a devastating shortage of staff, which means that almost 40 percent of paediatric intensive care beds cannot be operated. DW quotes a senior consultant in paediatric intensive care in Hanover saying, "Children are dying because we can no longer care for them."

The war-like conditions at German children's hospitals are the result of the government's policy of waging war against Russia in Ukraine and its conduct of a class war against its own people at home to finance the bloodshed.

Every single one of the 35 stealth bombers—explicitly intended to drop US nuclear weapons already stored in Germany—could finance the complete rebuilding of a state-of-

the-art children's clinic. Instead, the ruling coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Greens and the neo-liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP), with the consent of all the opposition parties sitting in the Bundestag, have decided to cut the health budget by €40 billion compared to last year—despite the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. The parliament also agreed to purchase an additional 118,000 Heckler & Koch assault rifles.

The renowned Robert Koch Institute reports on its online resource "GrippeWeb" that the number of respiratory infections in Germany is already far above the seasonal level and threatens to rise further. The proportion of people with an acute respiratory illness (ARI) currently exceeds 11 percent, with a "clear upward trend." This means that about one in nine people in Germany is currently suffering from a respiratory infection. In 2021, the proportion of people with ARI was just under 4 percent. The increase is the result of lifting the most minimal of COVID-19 protection measures.

The RKI assesses the situation as follows: "The current very high value even exceeds the maximum values reached in previous major waves of flu." The main causes of respiratory infections are influenza and the respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), which mainly affects infants and young children.

DIVI President Christian Karagiannidis is also very concerned about the current situation, declaring, "I have never experienced anything like this before." The chronic shortage of nurses is currently compounded by the high level of sick leave among health workers.

Gerald Gass, head of the board of the German Hospital Association commented on the absences, "We now have around 9 to 10 percent absenteeism among staff." That is 30 to 40 percent more than normal at this time of year. The precarious staffing situation means that beds in clinics cannot be used or that even entire wards must be closed.

The Charité Clinic in Berlin, for example, has been operating in emergency mode in the run-up to the Christmas

holiday. All scheduled operations have been postponed. The children's clinics are severely affected by staff shortages, where employees are already working at limit. Children sometimes have to spend the night in hospital corridors with their parents forced to wait for hours—or parents must spend hours looking for another children's hospital with a free intensive care bed.

This situation causes despair not only for children, but also, and especially, for their parents. Staff at the Charité's Virchow Clinic told WSWs reporters that the children's clinic was full to capacity. They are angry and desperate about the situation.

"Cases of threats or the actual exercise of psychological and physical violence against health personnel are increasing," related Gerda Hasselfeldt, president of the German Red Cross.

Heinz Hilgers, president of the Child Protection League, concluded that "it was an indictment of current official policy that there are not even enough medicines and fever-reducing agents for children."

There are currently considerable supply shortages of certain medicines for children, such as fever-reducing medicines and suppositories, together with a shortage of anticancer drugs and antibiotics for adults. This is due to the high number of respiratory infections in children.

In addition, drug manufacturers are pulling out of the production of less profitable drugs—as is currently the case with 1A Pharma, a subsidiary of the Swiss pharmaceutical company Novartis, which had a market share of 30 percent in fever-reducing medicines. In 2021, in the middle of the pandemic, Novartis recorded a profit of US\$24 billion worldwide.

"The current bottlenecks are the result of years of pressure on prices and manufacturing costs for generics," complained the manufacturers' association Pro Generika. Consequently, more and more generic drug manufacturers are withdrawing from the production of key drugs.

In response, the German Health Minister Karl Lauterbach (SPD) announced before Christmas, a bill to "overcome supply bottlenecks." According to the minister, an erroneous pricing policy was responsible for the supply bottlenecks. "Price has played the sole role, availability of medicines has played too small a role. We want to undo that," Lauterbach said. In other words, the profits of the pharmaceutical companies are to take precedence and prices for medicines will rise further, although this will put an even greater burden on the health system.

For many years now, Germany's main political parties have been cutting the health system to the bone in order to maximise profits. Currently, the federal budget for health is being cut from €64.3 billion to €24.5 billion. Military

spending, on the other hand, is to rise from just under €50 billion to €58.6 billion. In addition, the government announced at the start of the Ukraine war that it intended to invest an extra €100 billion in the Bundeswehr.

The WSWs spoke to workers in front of the Charité. One worker said, "I find this intolerable. This is where the money should go. Everything is being closed down here, and it's the military that is being funded to finance the war. I agree with you."

Sabine opposed the purchase of nuclear bombers: "The government finds the money for that, but they don't have any money for children. There is money made available for so many things. ... I'm lucky, my children are still healthy. But now the teachers are sick! Everyone wins in a war, except the little ones—the little ones have to pay extra. I was a patient in the nephrology department. I noticed that the children's wards were full—and that's not just the situation in Berlin, it's like that everywhere."

Many others also declared it was "unbelievable" that money was being "wasted" on the nuclear bombers. Instead, one could "hire a lot more people" with that money. In Germany, there is an enormous need for nursing staff. According to conservative estimates, the country lacks a total of 200,000 nurses.

"It's terrible," said one nurse in the children's ward. "I am generally against weapons and arms supplies. The money should be invested in the health system. So many people have to be sent home at the moment, including teachers and ambulance staff."

"As trainees, we try to help where we can," related Rani, who works in an interdisciplinary paediatric ward. "The health insurance companies say they made a loss in the pandemic, but I don't believe it. So many old people have died."

Natasha from paediatric surgery added, "There are no beds left. There are hardly any nursing services left because staff shortages are so severe and nurses themselves are increasingly sick." Instead of €100 billion for the military and billions more for imperialist wars, this money should go towards health and education.



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