

The Berlin Senate and the German government end compulsory mask wearing on public transport

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In the midst of the Senate election campaign in Berlin, the Senate leadership—comprised of the SPD, the Green Party and the Left Party—together with the federal government has decided to end the compulsory wearing of masks on local and long-distance public transport. The Berlin Senate has also agreed to relax the law regarding the isolation of COVID-19 victims.

These decisions underscore the importance of the campaign of the Socialist Equality Party (Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei, SGP) in the Berlin Senate election. The SGP is the only party that opposes the policy of deliberately encouraging coronavirus contagion.

The Berlin Senate made the public transport decision last week, setting February 2 as the date for the new policy to take effect. The mask requirement will therefore end in the middle of winter, a time when particularly large numbers of people use public transport in Berlin and are often crammed together in overcrowded trains.

The Berlin Senate thus became the first city administration not headed by a conservative party, i.e., the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) or Christian Social Union (CSU), to lift the mask requirement for local transport. The decision underscores once again that the nominally “left-wing” Berlin Senate parties follow the same ruthless “profit before lives” pandemic policies as Germany’s traditional right-wing parties.

In addition, the Berlin Senate has decided to relax the isolation requirement for infected persons. From January 16, a negative coronavirus test is no longer required to end quarantine as long as the patient has no symptoms 48 hours before.

This policy can only be described as criminal. The relaxations are being implemented even though the

pandemic remains rampant, and around 175 victims are dying nationwide from the virus every day. The number of COVID-caused deaths totalled 937 last week, and an average of 10,000 people have to be hospitalised every week.

The number of infections is exploding particularly in Berlin, although this is not reflected in official statistics. This is being made clear by the extent of coronavirus detected in the city’s sewage. Although these values cannot be used to determine the exact incidence of the virus, they do provide important information about the basic course of the infection.

During the pandemic, the values recorded from wastewater monitoring have largely corresponded to those stemming from PCR tests. In the meantime, PCR testing has been drastically cut back, although at the end of October last year the concentration of coronaviruses measured in wastewater “shot through the roof,” according to the molecular biologist Emanuel Wyler.

Within the space of one to two months, the values measured in wastewater tripled, and even the Berlin health administration was forced to acknowledge that this was a worrisome figure but then concluded that “we can only speculate about its level and causes.”

This spread of the virus is also evident in Berlin clinics. In the week before Christmas, Charité University Hospital was forced to operate on an emergency basis, faced with the so-called ‘triple-demic’ of RSV, influenza and the coronavirus. Last Wednesday, the Berlin Medical Association criticised “untenable conditions” in the city’s hospital for forensic psychiatry. The conditions for patients were “in part inhumane and the working conditions for staff

intolerable,” declared the president of the Berlin Medical Association, Peter Bobbert.

The Berlin Senate's decision anticipated what is now being imposed in all other federal states. On January 9, federal Health Minister Karl Lauterbach (SPD) announced the nationwide end of compulsory masks in local and long-distance public transport, beginning February 2. To justify the move, the minister resorted to blatant lies, claiming that the situation showed the pandemic had stabilised, sewage monitoring values were constant or falling, the number of hospitalisations was decreasing, and new variants were not on the horizon.

Personally, he added cynically, he advocated “voluntarily wearing masks indoors,” but “it was now necessary to place more emphasis on personal responsibility and voluntary behaviour.” What this means is clear: the ditching of all remaining protective measures.

The states of Thuringia and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania have also announced they intend to abolish the regulation for the isolation of infected persons. In Thuringia, the date of February 3 has already been set, while the state government of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania plans to lift the isolation obligation about four weeks after ending the rule regarding the wearing of masks.

So far, the states of Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria, Hesse, Rhineland-Palatinate and Schleswig-Holstein have already lifted the isolation requirement for infected persons. And the regulation requiring masks will apply in only just under half of the country's states.

The latest relaxations also expose the role of the Left Party. Of the four federal states in which the Left Party is in government, only Bremen currently maintains the mandatory mask requirement in local transport. But even there, the SPD-Left Party-Green state government has announced that it will end the mask requirement at the end of March.

To the extent that the Left Party's coronavirus policy differs from other parties, it is because it is the most aggressive party on this issue.

The state of Thuringia is the best example. The administration led by the Left Party prime minister Bodo Ramelow was the first state government to openly propagate the Swedish policy of “herd

immunity,” i.e., the deliberate contamination of the population. As a result, Thuringia was for a long time the state in Germany that registered the most deaths. Currently, it occupies second place for coronavirus deaths measured as a proportion of the number of inhabitants.

The policy of contamination in the interests of profit maximisation, which is rigorously pursued by all parties, underlines the importance of the SGP's campaign for the Senate election in Berlin. In our election appeal we write:

The pandemic policies show the ruthlessness with which the governing parties place profit interests above human lives particularly clearly. In Germany alone, more than 160,000 people have already died, and millions are suffering the consequences of the disease.

The corporations are using the pandemic and the war to fabulously enrich themselves, close factories and reorganize production at the expense of the workers.

The SGP is the only party calling for a Zero-COVID policy to end the pandemic. It is directly linking the struggle against the pandemic to the struggle against war and social cuts. Overcoming these evils requires the independent mobilisation of the working class and the building of a new mass socialist party. Register now to actively support this programme and the SGP's electoral campaign!



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