

German government ends masking requirement in health and care facilities

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At the beginning of February, the obligation to wear a mask in buses and trains was ended throughout Germany, along with the Coronavirus Occupational Health and Safety Ordinance. This momentous decision will now be followed by the repeal of the testing and masking requirement for employees and residents in health care and nursing facilities on March 1. This means that wearing a mask will only be mandatory in medical facilities.

Originally, the masking requirement was to apply until April 7. On its website, the federal Health Ministry justifies the early lifting of this obligation by citing an “infection situation that has been stable for weeks.” Leading politicians from all parties are outdoing each other in declaring the pandemic over and dismissing coronavirus as a normal disease among many others.

“We are now treating COVID-19 like any other infectious disease—even in our country. That means there is no regulatory framework in Schleswig-Holstein that goes beyond that,” said the state’s Minister President Daniel Günther (Christian Democratic Union, CDU), for example. Baden-Württemberg’s Green Minister of Health Manfred Lucha announced the state had “reached endemicity. In terms of acute respiratory illnesses, we are at pre-pandemic levels.”

Other politicians go even further, attacking the protective measures implemented in the past, which—despite their limitations—have undoubtedly saved tens of thousands of lives. In Saxony, for example, the Liberal Democrats (FDP) are calling for a state parliament investigative committee which would, “review the measures taken during the pandemic and put them to the legal test.” Such an investigative committee had previously only been called for by the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD).

At the federal level, Wolfgang Kubicki (FDP), vice president of the Bundestag (parliament), is calling for a “comprehensive... parliamentary review” that would open “a new chapter in coronavirus politics.”

It is clear what is at stake. The imposition of protective measures is to be outright criminalized. Health Minister Karl Lauterbach (Social Democratic Party, SPD) told broadcaster ARD’s *Morgenmagazin* earlier this month that the closure of schools and day-care centres at the start of the pandemic was a mistake. He dismissively referred to the position that “schools must be closed because transmissions occur there” as “science at that time.” In another interview, he called the official figure of about 180,000 coronavirus deaths in Germany “not a bad number.”

The position of the ruling class could not be any clearer: To maximize its profits without interruption, it was and is willing to sacrifice hundreds of thousands of lives. Workers should also take Lauterbach’s statements as a warning for the future. In the event of a new pandemic, the ruling class would undertake no serious measures to protect the health of the population from the very beginning—no matter how many people might die.

And contrary to official government propaganda, the coronavirus pandemic is by no means over. This is shown, among other things, by a projection of the Federal Statistical Office (Destatis) on excess mortality. According to the report, 98,632 people died in January, 11,000 more, or 13 percent, than the median number for 2019 to 2022. For 2022, the excess mortality rate was nine percent, suggesting a high number of indirect deaths because of the pandemic. Data from the EuroMOMO network confirm that this is a Europe-wide trend.

The current 7-day incidence of 119.1 cases per 100,000 inhabitants (February 26) does not begin to reflect the true level of infections. For example, the level of coronavirus measured in wastewater in the capital city of Berlin suggest that the true infection numbers are more than 40 percent higher than reported.

Even if the officially reported COVID deaths are taken as a yardstick, it is clear that the virus is still rampant. More than 500 people are still dying from COVID-19 every week in Germany. A recent study by the University of Lucerne, published in the journal *Jama Network Open*, found that mortality resulting from infection with the Omicron variant is 1.5 times higher than infection with seasonal influenza.

The adjusted incidence of hospitalizations per 100,000 is also nearly 12, which corresponds to nearly 10,000 hospitalizations per week because of coronavirus infections. 1,005 people require intensive care—up from 776 the previous week. In medical treatment facilities, where masking requirements are scheduled to be eliminated March 1, the number of active outbreaks rose to 167 from 117 the previous week. In nursing homes and homes for the elderly, there were 182 outbreaks.

Of particular concern, the Omicron subvariant XBB, also known as “Kraken,” increased to 26 percent of cases. This is considered the most contagious subvariant to date.

The spread of Omicron variants and the accompanying removal of protective measures had already led to a massive increase in infections last year, directly impacting the lives of millions of workers.

According to an analysis by health insurer Barmer, there were significantly more people taking sick leave in 2022 than in the previous year. The proportion of sick leave that was coronavirus-related rose from 0.9 percent in 2021 to 20.2 percent in 2022. In January, health insurance providers Techniker-Krankenkasse and DAK-Gesundheit also published figures on sick leave. The latter recorded a sickness rate of 5.5 percent in 2022 for its 2.4 million working clients. The Kaufmännische Krankenkasse stated that in 2022, the number of those taking sick leave due to mental health problems had skyrocketed. It reported that the nursing, education, and social work sectors were particularly affected.

In addition to the immediate consequences,

aggressive infection with the virus also damages public health in the long term. Even seemingly harmless courses of infection can attack the organs and seriously damage them. Hundreds of thousands of people in Germany are already struggling with the consequences of Long Covid. The murderous character of the official coronavirus policy is most clearly reflected in life expectancy, which has already fallen by half a year in this country.



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