BioNTech: Profit takes precedence over health—and 1,860 employees lose their jobs in Germany

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The Mainz-based biopharmaceutical company BioNTech is halting COVID-19 vaccine production in Germany, closing almost all its German production sites and cutting 1,860 jobs. The sites in Marburg, Idar-Oberstein and Singapore, as well as the recently acquired CureVac plants in Tübingen and Wiesbaden, are to be wound up. The group, which has earned billions from COVID-19 vaccines, aims to save €500 million a year with these drastic cutbacks.

This is a severe blow to the affected workers, who have done an admirable job in helping to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, the pandemic is far from over. Last year, the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) recorded almost 150,000 infections and 2,551 reported deaths linked to COVID-19 in Germany. That is seven deaths per day, although the actual figure is likely to be significantly higher, as testing for coronavirus has virtually ceased.

With the cessation of vaccine production, the already low number of vaccinations—which have so far mitigated the consequences of the pandemic—will decline further. Immediately following the announcement of BioNTech's redundancy plans, the hantavirus outbreak on the cruise ship MV Hondius also served as a stark reminder that a new, far worse pandemic could break out at any time.

The destruction of extensive vaccine production capacity is criminal under these circumstances. It recklessly sacrifices the health of the population to the profit interests of pharmaceutical corporations.

For almost two years now, since late 2024, the BioNTech board has been hinting that the cutting of around a thousand jobs was planned, including 300 IT positions. Many workers who had the opportunity subsequently moved to other companies. But now that management is moving towards mass redundancies and site closures, the chances of those made redundant finding new work are significantly worse.

The redundancies come at a time when other chemical giants (BASF, Bayer, Evonik and many others) are also responding to the energy and sales crisis resulting from the war in Iran with mass redundancies. In total, between 40,000 and 50,000 jobs are currently at risk in the sector, and redundancies are also being made in industry, the banking sector and the IT sector.

Hypocritically, BioNTech has offered the redundant staff the chance to reapply for positions within the company's cancer research division. The group intends to focus entirely on the development of cancer drugs, a move that applies both to the current co-CEOs, U?ur ?ahin and Özlem Türeci, and to the remaining BioNTech management in Mainz. ?ahin and Türeci plan to set up their own new company for this purpose and will step down from their leadership roles by the end of the year at the latest.

Work in cancer research and development takes place under tremendous pressure. In Mainz, staff work in seven-day shifts around the clock, including Sundays, to drive the new cancer drugs forward to the point of regulatory approval. There are no plans to hire many new people; instead, the stated aim is cost-cutting: the group aims to save half a billion euros annually.

BioNTech has profited enormously from the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically from scientific research findings that were publicly accessible and deliberately not geared towards profit. The start-up joined forces with the US pharmaceutical giant Pfizer to market its COVID-19 vaccine—the first to receive approval—worldwide. As the WSWS wrote: "The mRNA technology on which the BioNTech/Pfizer vaccine is based was developed at publicly funded universities. Private firms only showed interest once huge profits beckoned. And even then, they were generally supported and backed by public funds."

The entire vaccine development process was only possible because outstanding researchers and scientists such as Professor Zhang Yongzhen in Shanghai sequenced the virus's genome and made it available free of charge on open-source platforms. It was only such actions that enabled BioNTech/Pfizer, Moderna and other pharmaceutical

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companies to develop their vaccines so rapidly.

As the COVID-19 pandemic spread in 2020, the governments of the EU, the UK and the US provided generous funding for research: In the case of BioNTech/Pfizer, this included a €100 million development loan from the European Investment Bank and a €365 million grant from the German government, alongside advance payments from the US government, which were effectively interest-free loans.

BioNTech's share price skyrocketed, from €13 in October 2019 to €150 in 2021. On this basis, the pharmaceutical group generated billions in profits. According to the *Handelsblatt*, sales of the COVID-19 vaccine brought BioNTech just under €19 billion at its peak, of which the company still holds assets worth over €15 billion to €16 billion today.

German politicians, particularly the then-Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democrats), kept a protective hand over the private company. When in 2021 more than 100 WTO member states, led by India and South Africa, called for a suspension of patent protection to enable poor countries to develop vaccines rapidly, the Merkel government opposed the patent suspension with all its might. Angela Merkel is said to have personally phoned U?ur ?ahin to reassure him on this matter.

One consequence of the rigid patent protection was, among other things, that barely 2 percent of the population in Africa could be vaccinated, with fatal consequences that have, however, received little public attention. The catastrophically poor reporting systems simply ignored the coronavirus death tolls in large parts of Africa. In Zambia, for example, only ten percent of COVID-19 deaths with a positive PCR test were actually recorded as coronavirus deaths. At the same time, new variants such as Omicron were able to emerge in these regions and spread rapidly across the globe.

At every turn and on every issue, the capitalist logic of profit has been and continues to be prioritised over public health and the public good. Fierce patent disputes between competing pharmaceutical companies mean that scientific discoveries and research findings with immense potential become a bone of contention between competing capital interests. Publicly researched knowledge, which belongs to everyone, is being privatised; the risks are socialised and borne by the taxpayer, while the profits are appropriated entirely for private gain.

And now, once again, nearly 2,000 workers are being laid off with no prospects, and their remaining colleagues are forced to work overtime whilst shareholders secure their profits.

This will only change when the pharmaceutical companies are expropriated without compensation and transformed into democratically controlled public utilities that do not compete against one another but instead network globally, share their research findings and collaborate with universities to serve the health and well-being of people, not private profit.

This is only possible on the basis of a socialist programme, realised by the international working class, which alone has the power to abolish capitalism. That is why we propose to our BioNTech colleagues that they set up independent action committees!

No effective resistance to the redundancies can be expected from the IG BCE or the works council. The trade union is a tool of the corporation; it is committed to industrial peace and the company's prosperity. The IG BCE, with 550,000 members—the third-largest trade union in the German Trade Union Confederation—is also regarded as its most business-friendly union. It organised its last sector-wide strike in 1971: over 55 years ago! Since then, there have been only symbolic warning strikes to "let off steam."

The IG BCE most recently demonstrated whose side it is on during the collective bargaining agreement in April 2026: just as it did four years ago, it signed a collective agreement that amounts to a real-wage cut. It begins with a nine-month pay freeze, followed by pay rises well below the rate of inflation and a 27-month no-strike clause.

"With this collective agreement, the workers are making the first move," said IG BCE leader Michael Vassiliadis, who sits on the supervisory boards of five major chemical and energy companies. Now, he added, "the employers must deliver." What a sham!

The BioNTech group has now clearly demonstrated the manner in which the chemical and pharmaceutical companies, or rather their managers, "deliver," with the announcement of new mass redundancies and site closures.

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