

Germany: Opening Berlin schools risks the lives of teachers, pupils and their families

By Carola Kleinert and Andy Niklaus
22 April 2020

On Wednesday, federal and state governments decided to gradually “relax” the current restrictions introduced to combat the coronavirus pandemic. “We must learn to live with the pandemic,” Chancellor Angela Merkel stressed. This includes the gradual opening of schools, which are to progressively resume operations from May 4.

Shortly after Merkel’s press conference, it became known that the gradual opening of schools will indeed begin as early as this week. Nationwide, those graduating high school will have to take their exams starting next week. Students in the tenth grade will have to start attending schools as of April 27. Starting May 4, sixth grade students will have to return.

At the same time, the social distancing and hygiene rules and the general ban on contact will remain in force. The young people, who are only allowed to travel in pairs or only as part of their families, must return to schools that had already come under harsh criticism before the coronavirus crisis because of their dilapidation, the uncleanness of their sanitary facilities and the lack of hygiene facilities and hot water.

While the state government of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), under state premier Armin Laschet (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) and Education Minister Yvonne Gebauer (Free Democratic Party, FDP), has already come under criticism on social media for its ruthless policies against students, resistance is also forming in Berlin against the state executive’s policy of opening up the city.

Berlin’s Senator for Education, Youth and Science Sandra Scheeres (Social Democratic Party, SPD), who had already proven her anti-social attitude towards working people and their children by closing schools and day-care centres far too late in the pandemic, suggested days ago that the schools should be quickly

opened again.

It is not even clear whether teachers and pupils will be equipped with protective masks. Will a compulsory test be introduced to identify infected students or teachers? What will happen to pupils and young people from households with infected family members who belong to the risk groups? Are they really allowed to stay at home, and what happens to their final grades?

What about the public transport that students will have to use? Busses and trains are themselves vectors for spreading the virus. Finally, young people are faced with the question of how the enormous psychological pressure that has been weighing on them for weeks will be taken into account when assessing their examination results.

The level of protection standards that Scheeres has in mind can be seen from her assurances that—now—there should be soap everywhere!

Just as the Left Party, the SPD and the Greens at federal and state level agreed to all the rescue packages for the financial elite and corporations, they are now ruthlessly pushing for a lifting of measures to combat the pandemic.

The position is that the population should become accustomed to the idea that the pandemic is a “normal state” and that infection with and death from COVID-19 is “unavoidable.” NRW Education Minister Gebauer cynically declared, “There will ... be school communities that have to mourn the death of teachers, school directors or family members, which can sometimes have a lasting effect on school life.” In the opinion of those in power, workers and young people must simply accept this.

As the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) wrote in a statement on April 13, there is a “vicious class logic” behind these efforts.

“Workers are treated as a kind of disposable product. Their deaths are regarded as a normal requirement for the generation of profit. Those who succumb to the virus can be replaced.”

The ignorance and cynicism of those with political responsibility is increasingly meeting with resistance from broad sections of the population.

For example, Kristine, a nurse, posted on Twitter angrily and stunned, “So I’m sending my three children back to 3 different schools together with thousands of other students? Then I go to the hospital to work and then I go to the seven elderly people who must still be cared for. Ingenious.”

Many students, like Noel, say they do not want to go to school until things improve, “I don’t want to be to blame for my mother being in intensive care soon.”

Sherly noted, “My beloved father works in the hospital and, even as someone at risk himself, helps with the breathing of Covid-19 patients for hours every day under strict safety measures. And when I come home from school, I’m supposed to bring it home? No, thanks.”

Another student tweeted, “I think this is all so stupid. We are like test subjects. Sure, education is precious. But human life is priceless.”

Stefan Hermanns wrote that he would not send his daughter to school, but wanted to be at school himself on Monday morning to check the hygiene rules. “If it depends on the hygienic conditions whether schools open again, there will be no classes in Berlin for the next five years,” Hermanns said.

With the hashtag #prosecuteScheeres, Sabine tweeted about hygiene in Berlin schools: “Now let’s be honest, anyone who talks about maintainable hygiene standards in schools has not seen a normal school from the inside for a long time.”

Larissa Selda asked indignantly, “What’s the point of staying home if I’m going to get infected anyway because I must go outside?” She demanded, “I want the health of all citizens to be prioritised and no exams, until there is a solution that will limit any new infections by far.”

The connection between the rush to open up the schools and the class issues is obvious to many.

Chris tweeted, “When politicians seriously open up schools & make people take their final exams, it just shows sooo blatantly that business is more important to

them than human lives”.

Simone Buchholz posted, “Nobody knows how the ailing schools are going to cope with the hygiene thing, but everyone knows who will pay for it: parents/mothers.”

Dennis commented, “14 days ago: ‘We are not relevant & of course we are also concerned about your health, we are closing down & bringing in short-time work’. Hardly any relaxation, today they call: ‘From Monday on we’ll be working full double shifts again’. Honestly, we’re all just puppets!”

In his tweet, Kurt Meier drew attention to the class question and the drastic redistribution of wealth from the bottom to the top of society that has been going on for decades: “What schools in Germany have long been known for: small classes, good supervision, cleanliness and good hygiene, ... oh, those were the private schools where the grandchildren of the #Leopoldina [National Academy of Science] people are.”

Rebel Heart wrote, “Education and keeping the economy running are unfortunately way more important to our politicians than health or human life.”

Johann van de Bron from North Rhine-Westphalia explained, “In the last few days, we have heard from teachers, scientists, parents, bus drivers, pupils, etc. that hygiene measures can’t be maintained in school! And that is also my assessment. If Laschet decides to #openschools, then we get an uncontrolled infection. NRW has 2.5 million school pupils. Even if only 4-5 years are sent back to school, this is surely more than half a million children and young people in schools, on the way to school, on playgrounds ...”.

In order to protect the health and lives of students and teachers, the working class must take up the struggle for a socialist programme. The ruling class and its stooges in the political establishment ruthlessly pose the interests of making a profit against the interests of the working class. This has been mercilessly demonstrated by the pandemic.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>