

Germany reopens schools, endangering thousands of lives

By Marianne Arens
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The premature relaxation of measures to combat the coronavirus pandemic will quickly lead to new infections and deaths. Nevertheless, almost all federal states have decided to gradually resume school operations.

The reason is not scientific knowledge, but rather pressure from industry: to force workers back into production, schools must also be reopened.

At present, all the leading state politicians are soothingly promising that the relaxation would be carried out responsibly and that hygiene and distance rules would be observed. For example, Thuringia's state premier Bodo Ramelow (Left Party) declared on Wednesday, "Our proviso is: get back to everyday life," but if there were another major outbreak, "Thuringia is well prepared to react."

Meanwhile, enormous anger and concern is proliferating among those affected because the schools are being misused as experimental laboratories and that children, teachers and parents are being used as test subjects in the interest of profits. A survey conducted by the news programme "Hessenschau" on Thursday showed that despite the non-stop propaganda, almost 41 percent thought the relaxation of the lockdown was too early, and only 18 percent thought it was right.

Thousands of teachers are returning with extreme reluctance to schools, where there are serious shortcomings in the implementation of hygiene and protective regulations. The state education ministries are forcing them back to teaching, even against their will. At the same time, they are returning to schools where neglect, wage dumping and lack of staff had already led to strikes and protests before the pandemic.

In Hesse, schools began teaching again as early as April 27. This takes place under staggering conditions. Even teachers over 60 can teach locally, and those who

are younger but belong to a risk group must prove this by producing a medical certificate, even if they are severely disabled. Daily cleaning has to be done in the evenings by (mostly private) cleaning companies, which have to clean whole schools with few personnel under great time pressure and for low wages.

In Frankfurt am Main, a teacher's urgent lawsuit was rejected. Referencing the fact that there was no adequate hygiene plan and no adequate occupational health and safety plan at her Frankfurt elementary school, she had filed a legal complaint against being compulsorily sent back to work, something she cannot avoid as a civil servant.

Her application was rejected because she could "not expect ... to encounter zero risk at the school with a hygiene plan that is polished down to the last detail." The judges did not even consider it necessary to examine the conditions at the school in question in a local visit.

This was the second such case in just a few days. Shortly before, the Giessen Administrative Court also rejected the urgent legal application of the deputy headmistress of a primary school in the district of Marburg Biedenkopf. She had demanded that an occupational health and safety inspection by a medical or virologic specialist take place before classes could begin, as the coronavirus pandemic posed "incalculable health risks." The judges hastily dismissed the case.

"Irresponsible" was the response of German and history teacher Frederik, in an interview with the *World Socialist Web Site*. "These teachers are basically and absolutely right," said the educator, who teaches at a secondary school in the Gross-Gerau district. "Everyone who works at a state school can confirm that the hygiene plans cannot realistically be implemented."

Frederik also reported that the oldest students had been back in school since April 27 to prepare for their final exams. This was almost a third out of a total of 600 pupils, so that each class could always be divided into two adjacent rooms. But what will happen when more children return was completely uncertain. “The more children who come, the less likely it is that the rules will be observed,” he said.

Several scientists have confirmed this assessment.

On the “Hessenschau,” Frankfurt virologist Martin Stümer explained that the focused loosening of the rules went too far for him. “We are in danger of losing control: That’s exactly what the virus needs.”

Virologist Christian Drosten also called reopening schools “risky.” Speaking on broadcaster NDR’s “Coronavirus Update” on Tuesday, May 5, he sharply criticized the political pressure that “some politicians” exerted on scientists to provide suitable arguments for the relaxation.

For example, the director of a research institute was told, “You are the boss of the whole thing here. We need numbers now!” Then there was a great danger that half-finished studies are published, which will be prepared for the public by the press office, i.e., by journalists and not scientists. “And there is already misinformation in the world,” he said. If it is now disseminated that “Science has found that schools can be opened,” then this is wrong and misleading and could cost many lives.

Drosten stressed that children of all ages and even infants can accumulate as many infectious viruses in the throat as adults. This was the result of his study at the Charité hospital in Berlin, as well as another study in Geneva carried out by the virologist Isabella Eckerle. He said, “Statistically, we have no reason to believe that [coronavirus] concentration in the throat of children is different from that of adults.”

Among older students, Drosten referred to the investigation of a coronavirus outbreak at a French high school. From it could be seen the “special drama” of a normal break situation of 15- to 19-year-old pupils in the schoolyard, he said. The virologist explicitly compared this situation with the notorious restaurant in the Austrian ski resort of Ischgl, from which the virus had spread throughout Europe, in terms of the danger of infection.

But government politicians do not care.

Teacher Frederik called it a “boosting of the economy at the expense of the people,” he told the WSWS. Teachers were being blackmailed, although it was clear to everyone, “There will be more deaths.”

He went on to say that the pandemic had intensified the trend of social polarisation, which had been foreseeable before. At his school, which is also attended by children of Opel workers in Rüsselsheim, it could be seen that workers’ children were now at an additional disadvantage. Online lessons had shown that some households only had one computer and often no printer. “The gap between rich and poor has widened.”

Frederik added that something important had become clear to him: “Our schools are actually not primarily there for education, but are a kind of barracks where children can be supervised and locked away.”

He could only deal with the most necessary subjects for the exams; students had already handed in their books. “Actually, I wanted to talk with them about May 8 and the liberation from fascism 75 years ago,” but now it was hardly possible.

Frederik did not expect any resistance from the teaching unions: “The GEW is critical, but it doesn’t propose any steps that could be dangerous for the state.”

The GEW already agreed to reopening schools in mid-April. In Hesse, on April 24, the union explicitly welcomed the statement by Education Minister Alexander Lorz (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) that emergency care would be available to all teachers’ children, so that teachers could return to school.

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