

Warnings of a second coronavirus wave in Germany

By Marianne Arens
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Following an outbreak of coronavirus infections in the Tönnies meat factory in East Westphalia, the virus is spreading rapidly to other companies and regions. Attempts by corporate heads and political leaders to prevent hotspots of the infection by isolating and locking away workers and those most vulnerable to sickness have patently failed.

Up to last Tuesday, 1,553 slaughterhouse workers and meat packers had been tested positive for the virus at Tönnies. Hundreds of workers had become infected, particularly in the meat-cutting department, where hard work at temperatures around 6°C provided ideal conditions for an outbreak. At least 27 workers had to be hospitalised, with five consigned to intensive care. At least two are being artificially ventilated.

Local residents held vigils and conducted protests to express their anger over the greed for profit on the part of company owner Clemens Tönnies. This week, a banner was hung at the entrance of the historic Glückauf-Kampfbahn in Gelsenkirchen with the inscription: “No exploiters at S04 - Tönnies must go!” The listed facility was the first stadium to be used by the football club Schalke 04, which was founded as a workers’ sports club.

Clemens Tönnies, a billionaire meat baron and intimate of Germany’s ruling Christian Democratic Union (CDU), is chairman of the supervisory board and sponsor of the first division football club. On Saturday, 1,000 Schalke fans conducted their own demonstration against Tönnies during a club football match.

Armin Laschet (CDU), premier of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), refused for a long time to reimplement a lockdown to contain the outbreak. But in the Gütersloh district the number of new infections rose five times more than the critical limit at the beginning of last week: instead of 50, it rose to more than 270 per 100,000 inhabitants. The number of infected people also

increased in the neighbouring district of Warendorf.

In the district of Gütersloh, the health authority registered more than 2,000 people, including 32 people with no direct connection to the Tönnies company. Finally, last Wednesday, the government of North Rhine-Westphalia was forced to impose contact restrictions on the more than 640,000 inhabitants of the two neighbouring regions.

The case of Tönnies has shown that the strategy of German business and political circles is not working. To keep profits flowing, Tönnies allowed his staff to continue working for four months, despite the risk of the pandemic. Leading politicians and the authorities played along, following the credo of Agriculture Minister Julia Klöckner (CDU) who advocated “de facto quarantine with simultaneous work opportunities.”

When the recent outbreak became known, Armin Laschet and other politicians first tried to stir up hostile sentiments against Eastern European workers, who make up a large proportion of the workforce in Germany’s meat industry. Politicians claimed that the virus was brought in by the Romanians and Bulgarians after the spring holidays—although these workers had worked continuously at the slaughterhouse. These Tönnies workers did not receive time off for the holiday break.

The virus knows no national or regional borders. Attempts to prevent its spread in Germany by establishing no-go ghettos are clearly doomed to failure.

Tönnies in Gütersloh is by no means an isolated case. This is clear from the example of the Müller Fleisch slaughterhouse in Birkenfeld (Baden-Württemberg), where the responsible district authority approved the continuation of production on April 24, although at least 230 workers in the company had already tested positive. Since then, other slaughterhouses, such as Vion in Schleswig-Holstein, have been affected by coronavirus. There have also already been outbreaks in North

Rhine-Westphalia: for example, at Westfleisch (Coesfeld and Oer-Erkenschwick) and at Boeser Frischfleisch in Schöppingen (Borken).

On Monday, June 22, the Bochum slaughterhouse, run by Willms Fleisch, had to be shut down after two employees contracted the coronavirus virus. Both of the affected live in private apartments and not in collective accommodation. In Moers, several employees in a kebab production facility have been infected, where 17 out of 275 employees tested positive for the coronavirus.

There are now new outbreaks in other federal states. In Lower Saxony, Premier Stephan Weil (SPD) declared that the state would only accept tourists from Gütersloh with a medical certificate declaring they are free from the virus. At the same time, several slaughterhouses in Lower Saxony have developed new hotspots.

In the Oldenburg district, a series of tests at a turkey slaughterhouse owned by the Wiesenhof company revealed that at least 35 workers had been infected. The accommodation for 200 workers was quarantined. Another poultry processing plant belonging to the same company in the Lohne district is also affected and at least three workers have been infected at a Danish Crown slaughterhouse in the Cloppenburg district.

The number of coronavirus infections is rising again nationwide, with the virus spreading rapidly through reopened schools. Coronavirus hotspots have been reported in Magdeburg, Göttingen, Berlin-Neukölln, Berlin-Charlottenburg and a number of other cities. Whole residential complexes have been blocked off by squads of police with residents locked away behind fences. In Göttingen, police used pepper spray against people in quarantine at the weekend. Such acts fatally recall scenes of police enforcing a ghetto with the use of armed force.

According to the Robert Koch Institute (RKI), the R value rose briefly to 2.76 on Tuesday, reaching a level similar to March, before schools closed. Although this value has since fallen, a more stable R value, which is not so influenced by local outbreaks, has been well over 1 for several days. According to RKI head Lothar Wieler, this second value was 1.83 on Tuesday and 1.1 on Wednesday. The figure indicates how many people are infected on average by someone with the virus, and a figure of 1 or above means that the virus is spreading exponentially once again.

The official figures are undoubtedly an underestimate, as the health authorities themselves admit. The number of unreported cases is very high. Many health authorities test

too little and do not pass on relevant figures, mainly because they lack the necessary staff. The additional staff available in the lockdown were withdrawn from duty after the lockdown was officially declared to have ended. Also, according to Donald Trump's motto, "Testing is a double-edged sword." Most politicians tend to avoid systematic testing because they fear the consequences.

The pandemic cannot be stopped by decree. "Science has an ice-cold hand," said Christian Drosten, chief virologist at Charité in Berlin, in his latest coronavirus update on June 23. "Science does not work in such a way that you can talk to it and say go backwards: Hey, we are all agreed and in reality we all want the same thing; now you change your mind a bit. But science has no opinion."

Speaking on a TV program titled "The virus is coming back," Drosten was genuinely concerned. He warned of a second wave in the fall when schools reopen. Regarding the spread in the district of Gütersloh, he said, "the virus had already been carried out into the population" because of the delay in identifying the disease. It is now expected that the number of hospital admissions will increase.

These developments in Germany confirm the position taken by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) which wrote in its statement: "The global coronavirus pandemic is spiralling out of control. ... indifference, incompetence and conscious policy on the part of governments has led to a catastrophic spread of the epidemic with well over nine million people worldwide infected and nearly half a million dead."

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