

Reopening of schools in Germany puts the lives of children and educators at stake

By Andrea Reissner
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The education magazine *news4teachers* calls the reopening of schools in Germany after the summer holidays a “gigantic field trial with an uncertain outcome.” The resumption of classes are being staggered by federal states, beginning on August 3 in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and ending on September 14 in Baden-Württemberg. Eleven million children and about 800,000 teachers are affected.

The situation is highly dangerous. Since the easing of the coronavirus restrictions, the number of cases in Europe, and in Germany, is once again on the rise. “We are amid a rapidly developing pandemic,” warned the president of the public health body, the Robert Koch Institute (RKI), Lothar Wieler, at a press conference on Tuesday. On Thursday, the RKI reported 902 new infections in Germany, the highest number since mid-May.

In its July 29 daily situation report, the RKI described the development as “very worrying” and wrote, “A further worsening of the situation must be avoided at all costs. This can only be achieved if the entire population continues to be committed, for example, to consistently observing rules on [social] distancing and hygiene—also outdoors—by ventilating indoor spaces and, where necessary, by correctly wearing a face mask.”

An overwhelming majority of the population shares this concern and is behaving accordingly. According to a report by the Federal Institute for Risk Assessment dated July 24, 2020, 92 percent of the population accept distancing regulation and the obligation to wear masks.

Not so the state governments. When schools are reopened, the RKI’s recommendations will be explicitly disregarded. For classrooms, the distancing rule of 1.5 metres and the obligation to wear masks will be thrown out. If at all, they only apply in corridors and partly also in the playground. The protective regulations that remain in force for businesses and public spaces do not apply in schools!

These provisions were agreed at a joint conference of the state education ministers. They differ from state to state only slightly, no matter which parties comprise the state government. In general, schools are returning to “regular

operations.” The regulations for infection protection are very general, often non-binding, and in many places not realizable due to the miserable condition of school buildings and the lack of personnel.

The reaction of teachers and parents is a mixture of scorn and despair to feeble advice on social media, such as: “To further limit the occurrence of infection, hygiene rules such as regular hand washing and regular airing of the rooms must continue to be observed. Direct physical contact is to be avoided as far as possible.” (Berlin) Or, “Sufficient liquid soap dispensers and disposable towels are to be provided and refilled to an extent that enables pupils and staff to carry out regular hand hygiene without unreasonable waiting times.” (Hesse)

In some states, the formation of cohorts spanning different classes or age groups is planned, which should, “as far as possible,” remain amongst themselves. In most cases, these are merely recommendations, with responsibility for compliance left to the schools themselves.

All the models for opening schools state that the incidence of infection will be monitored and, if necessary, stricter measures will be taken. In other words, the state governments are deliberately allowing outbreaks of COVID-19 to occur in schools.

What is striking is that Thuringia, which is governed by the Left Party under state premier Bodo Ramelow in a coalition with the Social Democrats (SPD) and the Greens, is the most unscrupulous of all the states. It provides for a so-called phased model. In stage 1, which applies initially, it says, “In principle, schooling in 2020/2021 will take place with all participants within the school buildings without restrictions.”

Studies disprove reduced risk

The assertion that the risk of reopening schools is manageable contradicts current scientific studies, which show that schools pose considerable risks in the event of a new wave of infection.

For example, a study in South Korea found that older children and adolescents infected other household members

as frequently as adults. Most infections occurred in households where a patient was between 10 and 19 years old. It follows that schools would become hotspots in the event of a wave of infection, as the SPD health expert Lauterbach admits.

In a highly regarded study, Berlin's Technical University has determined that the aerosol concentration in a classroom, which is critical for transmission, is reached after two minutes when a single infected person in the room coughs. The result of the study is documented in this video.

The allegedly lower infectivity of children, which is often cited to justify opening up schools, is not proven. In its July 24 COVID-19 profile, the RKI warns, "In another study from Wuhan, child-aged index persons infected household members more often than adults. ... Studies on the viral load in children show no significant difference to adults."

In Israel, the Ministry of Education randomly investigated the sources of 727 infections during the second wave in the country and found that almost 30 percent of these were attributable to educational institutions.

Policy Conclusions

Whether through negligence or malicious intent, the logic behind the reopening of schools is clear: the health and safety of children, parents and teachers is being put at risk in the interest of the economy. Children are being forced into schools under extremely risky conditions so that their parents can be available to work.

After decades of neglect and ruin of the school and education system, the pandemic is bringing to light more glaringly than ever what can no longer be hushed up: All the establishment parties are giving priority to the profit interests of companies over the social needs of the population. It is not a matter of misunderstanding or incompetence, but of tangible class interests. Profits can only be made if parents work. And for this to happen, children must be out of the way, no matter how. Working parents are faced with the choice of risking either their jobs or the health of their children.

There is massive resistance to this blackmail. Parents and educators also have many good suggestions and creative solutions to ensure safe teaching. There is no shortage of dedicated professionals who, with great personal commitment, do what they can to provide the best possible care and education for children in this difficult situation.

What is needed is a political perspective that unites all those involved and makes them effective.

Only a socialist perspective that places the school crisis in its social and international context can do this. The biggest problem is not the virus as such, but that it encounters conditions that block its effective control and favour its spread. These conditions are a result of capitalism, which is

the cause of unemployment, misery, environmental destruction and, finally, dictatorship and war throughout the world.

The coronavirus crisis will not disappear on its own. The misery in education will continue, even if a vaccine becomes available at some point. It must be actively tackled by working people in their own interest. This task is urgent and cannot be postponed.

Trade union organisations, which once brought about certain improvements, are now failing across the board. The Education and Science Union (GEW) is an active accomplice to the irresponsible opening up of schools. It is miles away from organising effective resistance and from protecting the interests of teachers.

It is hopeless to rely on appeals to governments or individual politicians. They have created the current situation in the first place.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) advocates setting up action committees in educational institutions and residential areas that are independent of the trade unions and establishment parties. In this way, the resistance against unsafe school openings can be coordinated.

However, the problem cannot be solved within the education system alone. For example, the struggle must be expanded to guarantee continued pay during home childcare.

To put opposition on a broad basis, action committees should make contact with workers in companies whose management is exploiting the coronavirus crisis to push through mass redundancies. There is also much to be done in other areas, especially in the protection of immigrants, left-wingers and all others who are threatened by neo-fascists and far-right terrorists from the police and state apparatus.

The aim must be to get to the root of the problem and build a broad mass movement against capitalism.

We call on all those who agree with this perspective and want to take part in this struggle to become active supporters of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei or its youth organisation IYSSE.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>