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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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By Johannes Stern
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German government endangers the health and lives of millions with return to work and schools

One week after the decision by Germany's federal and state governments to relax the coronavirus restrictions, the agreed upon measures are being aggressively implemented. The ruling elite is endangering not merely the health of millions of workers, school students, their families and friends, but also their lives.

A number of state governments—including the Social Democrat/Left Party/Green government in Berlin—forced thousands of students back to school earlier this week to sit their final exams. Regular classes for some school years began in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia on Thursday. Other states—including Hesse, Bremen, Hamburg, Brandenburg and Thuringia—will follow suit next week.

The policy of “gradual opening” (Chancellor Angela Merkel) is increasingly being exposed as a comprehensive plan to rapidly accelerate the revival of public life and the economy. In large cities, shops, including large shopping centres, are open once again. The federal government's decision to limit shop openings to stores with an area of less than 800 square metres was a dead letter from the start. Larger businesses have evaded the regulations by partitioning their stores. The Administrative Court in Hamburg then overturned the regulation completely on Thursday.

Merkel, who spoke out at a press conference on Monday against what she had described as an “orgy of discussions about opening,” is in reality organising this “orgy.” In her government statement to the federal parliament on Thursday, she stated that she unconditionally agrees with the initial relaxations agreed between the federal and state

governments, but merely finds their implementation “too bold.” Egged on by the media and big business, politicians from the government and opposition parties are seeking to outdo each other with ever more radical plans.

On Wednesday, Social Democrat Family Minister Franziska Giffey demanded an even more rapid opening of schools and kindergartens. “We have to talk about how we can achieve a gradual, a step-by-step opening of kindergartens and schools,” she said on the television show “RTL-Frühstart.” It is “not the case that everything can just stay shut until the summer.”

A central component of the policy is a revival of production, above all in the auto industry. “We are working hard to maintain supply chains,” stated Andreas Scheuer (Christian Social Union, CSU) during government questions in parliament on Wednesday. Daimler and Volkswagen, with the full support of the trade unions, have already restarted the assembly lines in several plants. Further plants will follow next week, including VW’s main plant in Wolfsburg, where some 63,000 workers are employed.

The government is justifying its “back to work” policy with references to “first successes” (Merkel) in the struggle against the coronavirus. This is intentional fake news. The reality is that the pandemic is continuing to accelerate its spread around the world, and the numbers of new infections and deaths are still rising in Germany. On Wednesday, the total number of deaths passed 5,500 and infections surpassed 153,000—the fifth highest number worldwide.

According to the Robert Koch Institute (RKI), Germany’s federal agency for infectious disease control, the number of deaths reached a record high over the past week. More than 300 coronavirus deaths had been reported during several single day periods, reported RKI vice president Dr. Lars Schaade at a press conference on Tuesday. The reproduction rate is also rising once again. Although it dropped to 0.7 last week, it rose back to 0.9 this week, approaching the critical figure of 1.

The dangerous implications of these developments are clear. If the reproduction rate increases above 1, this means that each infected person infects more than one other person, which will lead to an exponential growth of coronavirus. According to scientific modelling, the German health care system would be overwhelmed by October with a reproduction rate of 1.1, and in July if it rises to 1.2.

To put the matter bluntly: with its policy of reopening the economy, which has already led to an increase in the reproduction rate, the ruling elite is preparing a catastrophe and

encouraging the development of conditions seen in Italy and the United States, where health care systems collapsed under the burden of the pandemic. The terrible consequences are well known. Severely ill patients can no longer receive treatment and end up being left to die. The pictures from Bergamo and New York, where the army disposed of bodies piling up on the streets, quickly spread around the world.

Serious scientists and epidemiologists insist that such an escalation can only be prevented in Germany if social distancing measures are maintained and intensified, and a programme of mass testing and contact tracing is adopted.

On Wednesday, the head of virology at Berlin's Charite hospital, Christian Drosten, who advised the government for some time, warned against "gambling away the advantage Germany has achieved." On Monday, he stated in his podcast that the "activity of the epidemic could suddenly" return "in a disproportionate way or with unexpected power" if the reproduction rate "goes above 1 again." Even now, the Charite's intensive care wards are "increasingly full," even though there has not yet been in Berlin "a situation with a particularly high transmission rate."

Gabriel Leung of the University of Hong Kong, who advised the World Health Organisation and the Chinese government, told *Der Spiegel* in an interview that a rapid easing of the restrictions would be "irresponsible." "If you have such a large outbreak like it is currently in Europe, you have to use a sledgehammer," he warned. The aim "above all is to ... reduce the current reproduction rate." It needs to "decline a long way below 1 in order for the number of infections to reach an acceptable level."

The parliamentary debate on Thursday underlined the reactionary interests behind the criminal indifference being displayed by the government towards scientific knowledge and warnings. The ruling class sees the coronavirus pandemic as an opportunity to intensify its aggressive class policy and great power ambitions. Representatives of the government and opposition parties left no doubt about this. The health and social wellbeing of the population must necessarily be sacrificed, according to this policy, on the altar of capitalist private profit.

"Everything we decide costs money—lots of money—that someone has to pay back at some point," stated Ralph Brinkhaus, head of the Christian Democrat/Christian Social Union parliamentary group with reference to the multibillion-euro bailout packages, which have been adopted over recent weeks with the full backing of all parties. The message is clear: the vast sums of money, which above all went to the major corporations, banks and

the super-rich are now to be squeezed out of the working class. This is why the return to work cannot go fast enough for the ruling elite.

A second factor is the geostrategic and economic interests of German imperialism, which after losing two world wars is once again attempting to dominate Europe in order to play a role as a world power.

“What we need now are pragmatic and goal-directed measures for Europe to emerge stronger from the crisis. That’s exactly what we want; because only a strong Europe can at the end of the day be able to compete globally with world powers like China and the United States,” stated Katja Leikert, deputy leader of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group.

The coronavirus pandemic is not slowing the return of German imperialism; it is accelerating it. On Wednesday, the government decided to participate in the European Union’s “Irin” mission off the coast of Libya with 300 soldiers, a reconnaissance plane, and one warship. The operation is aimed at consolidating fortress Europe against refugees and at setting the stage for new operations of plunder on the African continent.

Also on Wednesday, Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer told the parliamentary defence committee about one of the largest military purchases in post-war Germany: the replacement of its aging Tornado fighter jets with 93 eurofighters and 45 US-made F-18 jets at a total cost of almost €20 billion. The latter are aimed at securing Germany’s “nuclear participation” and the transporting and deploying of American nuclear warheads.

At the same time, the development of a new **fighter jet programme** by Germany, France and Spain is being maintained. The estimated cost for the entire Future Combat Air System (FCAS) is €500 billion.

The *World Socialist Web Site* warned in a previous perspective, “If the ruling elite has its way, the society that will emerge from the crisis will be characterised by an intensification of the tendencies that existed prior to it—increased inequality, exploitation, poverty and war.”

Seventy-five years after the downfall of the Nazi regime, humanity once again confronts the alternative, socialism or barbarism. Articles are now appearing in the media in fascistic tones calling for the virus to be allowed to spread at the cost of a large number of lives in order to allow production to restart and the predatory interests of German imperialism to be pursued.

“Anyone who wants to combat the spread of the virus by all means, also combats death by all means,” stated the Munich-based sociologist Bernhard Gill in a guest comment for *Der Spiegel*. “By contrast, in a spreading regime ... dying is a natural procedure, which is painful for the individuals involved, but viewed from a distance creates space for new life.”

To avert the imminent catastrophe, the subordination of society to the profit interests of a tiny super-rich elite must be ended. Large holdings of wealth and key industries must be nationalised and the billions and trillions currently flowing into the accounts of the banks and military must be deployed to build hospitals, protect the population and ameliorate the social consequences of the virus.

This requires the mobilisation of the widespread opposition in the working class to the capitalist policy of reopening the economy on the basis of a socialist and internationalist programme.

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