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By Johannes Stern
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German government accelerates its deadly back-to-work initiative

Despite the continuing spread of the COVID-19 pandemic throughout Europe and internationally, the German government is accelerating its policy of lifting the limited restrictions that were imposed to prevent the transmission of the virus. Following a conference call with Germany's 16 state minister presidents on Thursday afternoon, Chancellor Angela Merkel unveiled a further loosening of restrictions at a press conference. Religious services will once again be permitted, and museums, galleries, memorials, zoos and playgrounds will open provided they meet certain conditions.

"Today's consultations" are "only an intermediate step," Merkel declared, before thanking all of those who are "thinking about ... restarting" economic and social life. Already on May 6, next Wednesday, a "comprehensive package will be adopted." Among other things, the heads of government will "discuss the proposal from the education ministers," which includes the general opening of all schools and kindergartens. Subsequently, they would also focus on providing a perspective for restaurants, tourism and other sectors, she said.

Similar to two weeks ago, when the government **announced** the initial lifting of some regulations, Merkel combined her statements with a warning about being "careful" and pledged to do everything to avoid a "relapse." She justified the drive to reopen the economy by saying, "We have managed to reduce the spread of the virus."

This is nothing more than propaganda. The reality is that the pandemic continues to spread worldwide, and the number of infections and deaths in Germany is still rising on a daily

basis. On Friday, the death toll rose above 6,700 and total cases surpassed 164,000. This is the sixth highest total in the world, behind the United States, Spain, Italy, Britain and France.

A few hours prior to the government's press conference, the head of the government's own Robert Koch Institute (RKI), Germany's federal agency for infectious diseases, admitted at a press conference that the number of deaths from the coronavirus was continuing to rise. "We see that the fatality rate is rising in Germany," Lothar Wieler noted. The agency even "assumes that more people have died from COVID-19 than have actually been reported."

The government's "easing" of regulations has nothing to do with being "careful." The reality is that almost no other country is going so far and in such an organised manner than Germany. Schools and businesses are reopening, auto plants and industrial facilities are restarting production, and all other sectors of society are now to follow suit as soon as possible.

The ruling elite is thus all but provoking a situation like in Italy or the United States, where health care systems collapsed under the weight of the pandemic and tens of thousands have died under horrific conditions. The drive to reopen the economy is endangering the lives of hundreds of thousands of workers and flies in the face of all scientific research on the coronavirus.

Already last week, the head of virology at Berlin's Charite Hospital, Professor Christian Drosten, warned against "gambling away the advantage that Germany has." He stated 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." Over recent days, he repeated his warning in interviews with the British and Belgian media.

On Thursday, Drosten and a team of researchers **published** a pre-print of a study that warned against "an unlimited re-opening of schools and kindergartens in the present situation." New research and data suggest "that viral loads in the very young do not differ significantly from those of adults. ... Children may be as infectious as adults."

The catastrophic consequences of a premature return to school and the factories are becoming ever clearer. At the beginning of the week, a high school in Dormagen in North Rhine-Westphalia was forced to close after just a few days when the mother of a student tested positive for COVID-19. In factories, where the hygienic conditions are no less appalling, the virus is running rampant. At the Amazon distribution centre in Winsen, at

least 68 of 1,800 employees have been **infected**. At a slaughterhouse operated by the meat processing firm Müller Fleisch in Birkenfeld near Forzheim, 300 workers are infected.

Despite this, the grand coalition, with the support of all parties in parliament and the trade unions, is aggressively pursuing its “back-to-work” policy. In a previous **comment**, the *World Socialist Web Site* analysed the objective interests that are driving the ruling class and its organisations. Firstly, the hundreds of billions of euros in “coronavirus bailout” funds, which above all went to the major corporations, banks and super-rich, are now to be squeezed out of the working class.

A second factor is the geostrategic and economic interests of German imperialism, which views the crisis as an opportunity to strengthen its international position against its rivals. “There are also geostrategic interests,” noted an article in *Der Spiegel* in April. Under the headline “The Path Out of the Lockdown: German Carmakers Prepare To Ramp Up Production,” the article observed: “Executives at companies in Europe want to strengthen the European market in order to establish it as a counterweight to the United States and China as economic powers ...”

The class character of the crisis is becoming increasingly apparent. While German capital is readying itself to boost corporate profits and preparing for trade war and military conflict among the major powers, millions of workers and their families face destitution. Yesterday, the Federal Labour Agency announced that German companies have applied for short-time work payments for 10.1 million employees. The number of unemployed workers rose by 308,000 in April to 2.6 million. Economy Minister Peter Altmeier projected on Wednesday a contraction of gross domestic product by 6.3 percent this year, which would be the deepest economic recession in Germany since the end of the Second World War.

All of these developments have revolutionary implications. The “back-to-work” campaign, which is being pursued in every country, has already provoked an explosive response in the working class. Recent days have seen spontaneous strikes in Mexico, Zimbabwe, Greece, Brazil and Britain. A centre of the strike movement is the United States—the global epicentre of the pandemic—where there have been at least 140 strikes since the beginning of March. In Germany, a growing radicalisation of young people, students and workers is also taking place.

In spite of the official propaganda—which seeks to downplay the seriousness of the pandemic and claims, in a **fascistic manner**, that human life should be sacrificed for

corporate profits—a plurality of Germans oppose current developments. According to a survey by polling agency Yougov, 49 percent of Germans think the lifting of restrictions is taking place much too quickly. Twenty-eight percent said they were satisfied with the pace of developments, while only 15 percent stated that the restrictions were being eased too slowly.

Workers must reject the false alternative they are being confronted with: either return to work and be exposed to the virus or be subjected to unemployment and poverty. They must unify their struggles internationally in order to counterpose their own socialist strategy to the deadly plans being pursued by the ruling elite. They must adopt a programme that places the big banks and corporations under democratic workers' control and expropriates the vast wealth of the super-rich in order to deploy it to combat the pandemic and meet other urgent social needs.

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