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Playing Russian roulette with hundreds of thousands of lives

German big business demands end to lockdown

Two weeks after the **initial lifting** of some of the coronavirus lockdown's restrictions in Germany, demands for its total abandonment have reached fever pitch. Business associations in particular are intensifying the pressure. The governments in Germany's federal states are engaged in a race to see who can overturn the restrictions the fastest. The news media and newspapers have shifted their propaganda into high gear.

They are all playing Russian roulette with the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. Although the number of active cases in Germany has been in decline for a month due to social distancing measures, the lifting of the regulations threatens to produce an explosive growth in infections. The virus has lost none of its threatening character, and a vaccination is expected only next year.

Above all, the pandemic is continuing to expand, making clear that only a global solution is possible. In the United States, the number of infections has increased by around 30,000 per day to reach 1.2 million with 950,000 active cases. This does not include undetected infections. The infection curve is rising rapidly in Russia, which is recording an average of 10,000 cases per day. There is also no noticeable decline in new infections in Britain, which with over 29,000 deaths has now surpassed Italy as the worst-affected country in Europe. In Germany, around 6,900 people have died from the virus.



BDI President Dieter Kempf, Chancellor Angela Merkel and BDI General Manager Joachim Lang at the German Industry Day 2017 (Wikimedia Commons)

On Monday, almost all schools in Germany reopened for select classes. A scientific study published over the weekend showed just how dangerous this is. The study disproves the claim that the infection risk is lower among children than other age groups.

A research team at the Berlin Charite Hospital led by virologist Christian Drosten examined the amount of virus contained within 3,712 samples and found that the quantity was not significantly different among the various age groups. Children could therefore be as infectious as adults. The researchers warned against an unrestricted reopening of schools and kindergartens.

Nonetheless, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the minister presidents of the federal states are set to agree on the further opening of schools and kindergartens during a meeting today. Joachim Stamp, the Family Minister in North Rhine-Westphalia, did not even bother to wait until the meeting. On the Morning Briefing podcast with former Handelsblatt editor Gabor Steingart, Stamp declared that his state, which accounts for 20 percent of Germany's population, would open its schools and kindergartens on its own terms if no agreement was reached. "We will not accept being fobbed off for another week," he said.

The pressure to lift the restrictive measures and reopen schools and kindergartens is coming above all from big business. One business association after another has spoken out over recent days in favour of a rapid return to work, even if this costs large numbers of lives. "What carries more weight, the danger to human lives or the threat to jobs and growth," wrote the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in summing up their arguments.

Following the Wednesday's meeting, it needs to be clear “in which stages social and economic life will start moving again,” demanded Dieter Kempf, president of the Federal Association of German Industry (BDI). Every week of economic shutdown costs “the German economy a figure in the mid tens of billions in value created.”

The Federal Association of Mid-sized Businesses penned an open letter to the Chancellor and minister presidents, “End the one-sided fixation on a purely virological approach and with it the dangerous game being played with the future of this country. Lift the lockdown before it's too late.”

The spokesman for mid-sized businesses for the Christian Democrats and Christian Social Union, Karsten Linnemann, demanded a “staged plan for all branches with a clear perspective.” The president of the Ifo Institute, Clemens Fuest, appealed for a convincing plan for an exit. Eric Schweizer, president of the German Chamber of Industry and Trade (DIHK), called for “clear criteria and pragmatic decisions.”

Since the beginning of the lockdown, the banks and major corporations have cashed in on hundreds of billions of euros in state funds. The bailout programmes and wage compensation paid by the federal government and the states amount to €1.2 trillion alone. In addition, €500 billion is being made available by the European Union Commission and more than €1 trillion by the European Central Bank. The ECB will purchase state and private debt so as to boost the stock markets.

Only a fraction of these vast sums is aimed at combatting the pandemic and its social consequences, or the support of small businesses, which are going bankrupt in large numbers. The overwhelming majority will end up in the bank accounts of the banks and major corporations. The largest company on the German stock exchange, Volkswagen, is currently negotiating with the federal government over a bailout and premiums for customers worth billions of euros, even though the company made a €17 billion profit last year and paid out billions more to shareholders—above all to the wealthy Porsche and Piech families, and top managers.

The representatives of big business are now demanding that these huge sums of money be squeezed out of the working class. This is the real reason for their insistence on the lifting of the lockdown.

Wolfgang Schäuble, the 77-year-old president of Germany's parliament, provided the slogan for this campaign when he told the *Tagesspiegel* 10 days ago that human lives

should be sacrificed for business interests. Ever since, almost everyone advocating a rapid end to the lockdown bases their remarks on Schäuble.

In an interview with the *Mittelbadische Presse*, which appears in his electoral district, Schäuble reiterated his point. “The longer the measures last, the greater will be the economic and social consequences,” he said. “Therefore, it is not correct to say that the protection of life and health has unconditional priority over everything else.”

In the same interview, Schäuble demanded that the billions now flowing into the pockets of the super-rich must now be “generated,” i.e. obtained through the exploitation of the working class and social spending cuts. “But at the moment, I’m concerned that the people are under the impression that the state can pay for everything,” he said. “In the end, however, we can only spend as much on assistance and social welfare as we generate.”

As German Finance Minister, Schäuble was responsible for the ruthless austerity programmes that destroyed Greece's social services and plunged working people into bitter poverty. His words must be taken as a warning.

While big business, the media, and politicians push for an end to the lockdown, they are also deliberately seeking to exploit the anxieties of middle class layers who fear for their existence. The media has systematically played up demonstrations of a few dozen people protesting against the “restriction of basic rights” by the coronavirus measures.

On Saturday, 5,000 people attended one such demonstration for the first time, after the Federal Constitutional Court overturned a ban by the city of Stuttgart. While the organiser, the IT businessman Michael Ballweg, claimed he was neither left- nor right-wing, the demonstration was welcomed enthusiastically by right-wing extremists as a blow against the “dictatorship of the virologists.”

Christian Drosten, the leading virologist in Germany, is now receiving death threats, according to the *Guardian*. The campaign against him was also joined by North Rhine-Westphalia Minister President Armin Laschet, who is a candidate to succeed Merkel and is pushing for a rapid end to the lockdown. The virologists change “their opinions every few days,” said Laschet accusingly on the Anne Will talkshow. They warned about a spike in infections that never came, he added.

The well-known business journalist Ranga Yogeshwar described this as “nonsense.” The reality is that a second wave has not yet materialised because the virologists' advice was followed. “Instead of celebrating the success of the measures and being satisfied with the positive course of events so far, criticism of the experts is growing.”

The pandemic could be contained and its social impact overcome if merely a fraction of the trillions of euros now flowing into the pockets of the corporations and super-rich was invested in combatting the virus, personal protective equipment, universal testing, childcare for parents who have to work, and support for the unemployed and small business.

But such a solution is incompatible with the capitalist system, which rests on the enrichment of a minority at the expense of the vast majority. It requires the mobilisation of the working class for a socialist programme.

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