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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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11.04.2021

“Science denial” and a “policy of contagion”: Germany’s leading virologists condemn government’s anti-lockdown policy

Although the number of COVID-19 patients in German intensive care units has been rising exponentially for four weeks, the federal and state governments refuse to close schools and businesses to contain the pandemic. In recent weeks, medical and scientific experts have been insisting on the implementation of a “hard lockdown,” as the more infectious and deadly B.1.1.7 virus strain is spreading unhindered and is now responsible for over 90 percent of all new infections, according to the Robert Koch Institute (RKI).



Virologist Christian Drosten

“I think all virologists agree that we need a hard lockdown immediately in this critical phase of the third wave,” Oliver Keppler, a professor of virology at Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich, told the Tagesschau TV news on Tuesday. “Honestly, I ask myself: where is it? It should have been implemented by now. There is no alternative. And we need it now, and preferably uniformly throughout Germany.”

The German government, however, is doing absolutely nothing to comply with this demand. Instead, the government plans to expand its vaccination programme as infection incidence figures rise, in what amounts to a recipe for the emergence of vaccine-resistant virus mutants, according to experts such as Max Planck researcher Viola Priesemann.

Only a fortnight ago, German Chancellor Angela Merkel personally reversed the so-called Easter Truce adopted by all state heads to contain the spread of the virus. Yesterday, she announced via an official spokesperson that the call for a “short uniform lockdown” was “correct” but that there was currently “no discernible majority” for early federal-state consultations to decide on further measures.

The declared “role model” for the latest stage of the contagion policy is that adopted by the government in the state of Saarland. On Tuesday the state coalition of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Social Democratic Party (SPU) initiated the opening up of outdoor restaurants, fitness studios, theatres and cinemas, although the number of infections is increasing in all urban and rural districts across the state, and the last meeting of the federal and state governments concluded that the opening up of public facilities should only take place in “selected regions.”

The Saarland initiative, flanked by unscientific rapid test regulations, is highly controversial even among those who could potentially benefit. According to a survey by the Hotel and Restaurant Association of the Saarland, almost 60 percent of all members said they wanted to “wait with opening up” despite a large loss of income.

As reported by Saarländischer Rundfunk, the so-called “emergency brake”—which consists of largely ineffective measures—is to be pulled only “when there is a threat of an overloading of the health system.” Such a “step-by-step plan,” based on the number of “free intensive care beds” and other parameters apart from infection incidence, has been

repeatedly demanded by right-wing advocates of herd immunity during the recent weeks and months.

With regard to Saarland and similar “model projects” in the states of Lower Saxony, Saxony and Saxony-Anhalt, virologist Sandra Ciesek (Institute for Medical Virology Frankfurt) told NDR news on Tuesday: “If opening up takes place then citizens must be clear that this has nothing to do with health safety.” Instead of containing the pandemic based on a scientific testing strategy, “responsibility is being shifted to the citizen,” she noted. The impression must not be given, Ciesek said, “that this is safe”—any consequences from the current vaccination plan are “not yet in sight” and, tend moreover, to be “overestimated.”

Even a four-week “lockdown in which contacts are reduced by up to 50 percent” is insufficient to reverse the current trend, the virologist noted, referring to recent statements made by the CDU leader Armin Laschet. At the beginning of the week, Laschet, premier in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), spoke of the advisability of a so-called “bridging lockdown” for “two, three weeks,” but refrained from making any concrete demands for the closure of schools, day-care centres and businesses.

Although the weekly incidence has exceeded the danger level of 100 (per 100,000 people) in about 30 urban and rural districts of NRW, many areas are not even implementing the “emergency brake” already decided upon. “If we as doctors clearly act against evidence, it has massive consequences,” Ciesek recently declared on Twitter, adding, “when politicians do, it doesn’t matter.”

As the *World Socialist Web Site* reported, this anti-science and inhumane policy is being pursued by all bourgeois parties. In the Left Party-led state of Thuringia, the weekly incidence is higher than 100 in 19 urban and rural districts and exceeds 200 in eight districts (392 in the Greiz district). The statewide average incidence of 217 during past weeks is almost double the national average.

The proportion of intensive care beds occupied by COVID-19 patients is already 35 percent in Thuringia, close to the previous high, when more than 1,000 people died daily on a national basis in January. Although the average age of admitted patients continues to fall, more than half require artificial respiration. Despite this, state Premier Bodo Ramelow

and Education Minister Helmut Holter (both Left Party) decided in March that schools in Thuringia would no longer be obliged to close, even though incidence rates were over 200.

“What is currently being implemented is a policy of contagion,” virology professor Melanie Brinkmann stated on the talk show “Markus Lanz” on Friday. “What is the goal? Not to overload intensive care units? That is pretty stupid and absolutely the wrong goal,” she said, struggling for words. “We could have had incidence levels in low double figures by now if politicians at the federal-state conference in January had taken seriously the advice we gave them.”

She also said that there had been “no response” to the B.1.1.7 virus, even though medical models had “clearly” predicted in January the current catastrophic development. Brinkmann concluded, “One could have stopped the spread of this more infectious variant if one wanted to.”

Politicians and industry chiefs, however, “didn’t want to”—just as they did not want to prevent the global spread of SARS-CoV-2 in March last year. In a recent Twitter post addressing the issue, virologist Isabella Eckerle of Geneva University Hospitals notes:

“I have more and more the feeling that containing the pandemic, or even dealing with data objectively, was never the goal among some politicians.” Rather, the decisive factor for decision-makers is “only the question of how to let it take its course without being held responsible afterwards.” According to the researcher, there is no other explanation for the seemingly “completely irrational decisions.”

In fact, the criminal and deliberate decisions taken by the ruling elite reflect the irrationality of the capitalist world system, in which the pandemic is increasingly turning into a factor in imperialist geopolitics. This was expressed unequivocally by Chancellor Merkel in a government statement in December, when she stressed that the pandemic was “reordering” the “balance of power” of the great powers in “global systemic competition.”

In order to enforce the murderous contagion policy, the German ruling class has from the beginning of the pandemic been able to rely on a well-oiled propaganda machine consisting of the tabloid press, pseudo-scientific careerists and state disinformation. Working together, these forces have driven up profits and the German stock market to its

current all-time high of over 15,000 points, while hundreds of thousands have died a painful death across Europe.

In his coronavirus update on Tuesday last week, Professor Christian Drosten referred to the “classic motives of science denial” in political debate, “with which one is familiar from the climate debate.” These factors include, among others, various “pseudo experts with professorial and doctoral degrees,” such as the signatories of the “Great Barrington Declaration” and the “KBV Statement.” The “main lines of science denial” are then topped up by “false impartiality” in media reporting, “ad hominem attacks” in leading newspapers, “misleading analogies” such as comparisons to seasonal flu, along with the claim that one must “learn to live with the virus”—the notorious credo of the proponents of mass contagion centred on the figure of Bonn virologist Hendrik Streeck.

Taken together, according to Drosten, “media and politics” in association with “certain social groups” have made a “major contribution” to “disinformation.” In light of the widespread denial of science in political circles, he was “not sure” whether the necessary measure, i.e., a new lockdown, would “ultimately be chosen.”

These scathing verdicts on Germany’s pandemic policy from leading COVID-19 experts illustrate once again the hostility to science and basic human interests prevailing under capitalism. As a result of the government’s ruthless contagion policy, more than 77,000 people have died of coronavirus in Germany alone. The dramatic experience of the last few months shows that the pandemic cannot be defeated by appeals to those in power.

In his podcast contribution, Drosten warned the government that the population could resist its profits-before-life policy by intervening independently: “If we get a high incidence wave, then the population will respond in its own way. This will then result in real damage to the economy.” Back in March, physicist and government adviser Dirk Brockmann, faced with the refusal of the federal and state governments to impose the necessary lockdown, told *Die Zeit*, “I think people realise they have to fight the pandemic themselves.”

It is this programme that must now be put into action. In order for workers to “fight the pandemic themselves” and bring about a genuine lockdown through a European-wide general strike to close schools and all nonessential businesses, new organisations able to

act in an internationally coordinated way are needed. A scientific and rational health programme can only be implemented on the basis of a socialist perspective, against the resistance of nationally organised capitalists.

World Socialist 10.04.2021