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Germany and Covid-19

# Germany “more determined” v. coronavirus than U.S., but not out of the woods

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**More than 60,000 Germans have tested positive for the coronavirus and 577 have died from Covid-19 as of March 31. Yet, Germany has not yet suffered the terrible casualty rates seen in France, Spain, and Italy where approximately 25,000 people have died in the last few weeks. And while workers have suffered neoliberal cuts, Germany's powerful capitalist class has partially succeeded in forcing weaker states in the European Union to bear the brunt of the long-running economic crisis. But the monster is next door and Germany is not out of the woods. And even if it Germans are spared the worst, the far right is growing and the parties of government may well use this crisis to buttress surveillance powers to strengthen their hand in preparation for the deep recession that will no doubt strike at the heart of the countries manufacturing industries.**

**No Borders News: describe the state of the pandemic in your country or city. How many people are infected? How many have died? What do experts expect in the coming weeks in terms of how fast the contagion will spread.**

**Jakob Schäfer:** Compared to some other countries, Germany is less affected by the Corvid 19 virus. By March 30, the figures were 59,612 confirmed cases, 9,291 recovered, and 477 deaths.

However, there are two reasons this does not mean the situation is “relaxed.” First, experts expect the pandemic in Germany to peak in May (at present, the infection curve is far from flattening out). And second, limits have already been reached in a number of hospitals. If extreme projections come true, and 60 to 70 percent of the population is infected despite social distancing and severe restrictions on public life, then German hospitals will not be able to cope either.

**NBN: What practical measures has your national government taken to respond to the crisis? Have they acted responsibly or were they unprepared? Briefly describe measures your government is taking now to contain the virus and treat people infected with Covid-19. Is there a state of emergency, are schools closed, etc.?**

**JS:** The reactions were certainly more determined than in the U.S. under Trump, but here too they were not sufficient. Public events were allowed to go on for too long and a general ban on meetings (more than 2 people) was not imposed only late in the game on March 22. Last week, an extensive economic aid package was agreed upon (similar to many other countries), but criticism remains. It is true that schools, universities, kindergartens etc. are closed, but only essential businesses should remain in operation. All other businesses should have been closed and salaries should be paid. Only then could the ban on contact between people be sufficiently implemented. In many companies, people work without maintaining sufficient distance from each other. And protective measures must be strengthened all over Germany. For this purpose, companies that produce protective equipment must be requisitioned to do so, but that is in complete contrast to the ruling ideology. Because of this, prices for such equipment are soaring.

**NBN: How has your health care system responded to the crisis? What are your health care system's greatest weaknesses? What are its greatest strengths?**

**JS:** In contrast to some countries (above all U.S., Spain, the U.K., and Italy), many tests were carried out relatively early in Germany. This enabled early treatment of the infected, so the mortality rate in Germany is not as high as it is in the U.S., for example.

However, this should not make us forget the structural weaknesses that neo-liberal policies have inflicted on the German health system in recent years. Here are a few figures to illustrate: While the population 1994 was 81.5 million, growing to 83.2 million in 2020, the number of hospitals in these years has fallen from 2,337 in 1994 (with 615,000 beds) to 1,938 in 2020 (with just 490 000 beds). That is a 21.8 percent drop. Today we have only 28,000 intensive care beds. This is certainly more than in Italy, but it is far from what the virologists have been demanding since their 2012 report when they asked for more than double that number. New intensive care beds are currently being prepared, but if the situation worsens it will not be enough. In addition, there are far too few nurses, mainly due to the fact that they are so poorly paid so the personnel ratio is about 10 to 1. Even in “normal times” it should be 4 to 1 or better. Now it will be impossible to train enough nurses in a short period of time, especially if the situation gets worse.

**NBN: Describe the official political response to Covid-19 in your country from the far-right and conservative parties, to liberal and social democrat parties, and the parties of the left if applicable.**

**JS:** Among the ruling parties (Christian Democrats, Social Democrats, Greens, and Liberals) there are no major differences in how to react to the crisis. Even the racist party AfD (Alternative for Germany) broadly agrees with this policy. Their only difference lies in the question of how to deal with refugees, it wants to hermetically seal off the borders for refugees, which is, in fact, the case already.

The left-wing party Die Linke attaches greater importance to providing more help for the nursing staff and the like, but its criticism refers only partly to the structural weaknesses of the current health care system in capitalist Germany.

**NBN: How have trade unions responded to the crisis? Especially public sector, education, and health care unions?**

**JS:** Unfortunately, the German trade unions (that is the trade-union leaderships) are behaving very defensively. They are neither demanding fundamental changes to the health system, nor are they demanding, at a minimum, strong wage increases for everyone in the health sector (especially the nurses). On the contrary, in the most important collective bargaining round this year (in the metal and electrical industry), an agreement was reached with the employers to waive wage increases now because of the Corona crisis. The collective agreement expires at the end of March and the “peace obligation” — a no strike agreement that is installed with each collective bargaining agreement — would have expired on 29 April. Now everything has been postponed to the end of the year and the peace obligation does not end until January 29, 2021. Things are no better in the public sector, where the collective bargaining agreement in the local transport sector (buses, trams) expires on June 30.

The most important area is, of course, the care sector. Here, wage improvements of at least 50 percent should be demanded, together with better personnel ratios at least for the period after the coronavirus crisis. This is the only way more people be recruited and trained for this very important and strenuous profession.

**NBN: How have social movements (student, feminist, ecological, immigrant, indigenous, etc.) responded to the crisis?**

**JS:** In recent weeks, the political life of the various movements and left organizations has largely come to a standstill. Many are now moving to online conferences, etc. But it takes time to organize this. As far as we can follow the political demands, most of them have so far reacted correctly by highlighting the weaknesses of the health care system and attributing this to capitalist policies, especially their neo-liberal intensification. In particular, the massive privatization of hospitals (almost 40% have now been privatized) and the closure of rural hospitals have rightly been harshly criticized.

**NBN: Are there any efforts to make demands for social justice, national health care, emergency economic measures for unemployment pay, stopping rent and debt payments, etc.?**

**JS:** These demands are raised, but essentially only by the radical left. There is (still) no broad movement for 100 percent wage continuation for part-time work, etc. This may change in the coming weeks, when larger numbers of employees and self-employed persons will lose lots of income. It is not yet possible to assess to what extent the government’s direct aid payments will be sufficient to prevent massive impoverishment.

**NBN: Can you assess the impact of the Covid-19 crisis and how you think it will impact national politics in the coming weeks and months?**

**JS:** At the moment this question is still very difficult to answer, but one consequence is already foreseeable: The government is trying to use the “corona-crisis” to introduce more intensive surveillance measures. For example, they are creating motion profiles using mobile phone data and they are invoking disciplinary emergency measures in the face of the crisis. And there are additional authoritarian reactions in play such as border closures. These provide a public display of state power and are used today because they seem to be highly attractive in times of crisis. The government is using the coronavirus crisis to conduct dress rehearsals for certain measures it aims to use in the coming period. The public’s reaction will determine how far those in power will be able to go in using similar measures after the crisis.

31 March 2020

Source [No Borders News](#).

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