

German employers, politicians and media seek to abolish mandatory sick pay

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Since last autumn, there has been a growing number of interviews with managers, economists and politicians accusing workers of laziness and slacking due to the increasing number of sick days, amid calls for the abolition of decades-old social achievements.

On 6 January, Allianz CEO Oliver Bäte called in the *Handelsblatt* newspaper for the introduction for workers of a ‘Karenztag’, an unpaid sick leave for the first day of any illness. “We have to talk about what we can still afford in an ageing society,” Bäte explained.

This is coming from a man whose salary increased by 10 percent from 2022 to 2023 to 7.5 million euros a year. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Allianz has continuously increased its profits. For the full year 2024, the insurance group expects an operating profit of 14.8 billion euros. This is at the upper end of its forecasted range.

The head of the German Council of Economic Experts, Monika Schnitzer, has also joined the call for unpaid sick leave. She also suggested unpaid part-time sick leave for a few hours a day to allow employees, for example with broken bones and similar injuries, to continue working from home. The proposal was originally made by the president of the German Medical Association, Klaus Reinhardt. It is also supported by members of the Green Party and the Free Democratic Party (FDP).

The deputy leader of the conservative CDU/CSU faction, Sepp Müller said that Germany’s social systems are “increasingly strained” so new ideas must be discussed. There are also demands being made for the abolition of sick leave by telephone and a “reform” of the 8-hour day (FDP and CDU).

Freiburg economics professor Bernd Raffelhüschen, who works as a lobbyist for business groups, told the *Bild* newspaper: “The introduction of an unpaid sick day is a sensible proposal and should be quickly implemented by the next government.” However, he said, this saving for the employer was “only a drop in the ocean.” What is needed, he said, is higher contributions for those with statutory health insurance. Patients should have to pay the first €500

or €1,000 of medical treatment themselves each year or pay 20 percent of all medication out of their own pocket.

The attack on sick pay on the pretext of “work-shyness” is cynical and dishonest. In reality, the same corporations and politicians who are now calling for unpaid sick leave are responsible for the increase in the rate of sickness leave.

During the pandemic, large companies were handed billions while workers and their children were infected “to keep the economy running.” In the meantime, the German government has not only abolished mandatory testing and all coronavirus protection measures, but also stopped wastewater monitoring in October. In the same month, the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) reported a significant increase in respiratory diseases in Germany, caused primarily by COVID-19 and rhinoviruses.

For 2024, the health reports of the statutory health insurance companies have measured record levels of sick leave. The main cause of the increase in absenteeism was respiratory diseases, including COVID-19. In second place were mental illnesses, followed by musculoskeletal disorders.

There is also a resurgence of diseases that had long been suppressed in developed countries. Whooping cough is experiencing a significant resurgence in Germany, with case numbers rising to levels not seen in years. By mid-October 2024, more than 46,600 cases had been reported to the RKI, a sixfold increase compared to the previous year.

The number of cases is particularly high among nursing and childcare professionals. According to the Techniker Krankenkasse (TK), nursing staff took an average of 29.8 sick days in 2023, a new high. Compared to 23.2 days in 2021 and 28.8 days in 2022, this amounts to a significant increase. Care for the elderly was particularly affected, with employees in this sector taking an average of 34.2 sick days.

The ongoing coronavirus pandemic, re-emerging infectious diseases and mental health issues, against a backdrop of widespread attacks on healthcare systems, are part of a global pattern.

Airfinity, a data analytics company specialising in global

disease and public health trends, reports a significant increase for at least 13 infectious diseases, with case numbers in many regions exceeding pre-pandemic levels.

Over 40 countries or territories report at least one infectious disease with case numbers ten times or more above pre-pandemic levels. Diseases on the rise include cholera, dengue, invasive group A streptococci, tuberculosis, polio and influenza. Measles, respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), chickenpox and whooping cough are also on the rise and pose a significant risk to children and immunocompromised individuals. The dismantling of public health measures during the COVID-19 pandemic has given SARS-CoV-2 unrestricted access to the entire world population.

The increase in infectious diseases is also associated with a weakening of the immune system through repeated COVID-19 infections, including asymptomatic cases. Long COVID, a debilitating condition that affects multiple organ systems, is playing a central role. It increases susceptibility to various diseases and exacerbates existing health problems.

Federal Labour Minister Hubertus Heil (SPD) and representatives of the so-called employee wing of the CDU have so far spoken out against the restriction of sick pay, only because they do not want to provoke social protests before the federal election due in a few weeks' time.

The continued payment of wages during sick leave is associated with massive industrial action. In 1956/57, 45,000 metalworkers in Schleswig-Holstein went on strike for 114 days to achieve this end. It was the longest strike in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany, with strikers repeatedly rejecting the compromises negotiated by the IG Metall union. When the union finally called off the strike, more than 60 percent voted against it without success.

It would take several more years before sick pay was introduced in its current form. In 1969, it was enshrined in law. But in 1996, the government of Helmut Kohl (CDU) restricted it once again, lowering it from 100 to 80 percent of the contractually agreed wage.

Once again, there were massive strikes. Across the country, several hundred thousand workers in the engineering industry and other sectors took part in work stoppages. When the Daimler-Benz management decided to apply the new regulation, 30,000 car workers stopped working.

The Kohl government did not take the new law back. That was only done by Gerhard Schröder's (Social Democratic Party) government in 1998, but around nine million employees were guaranteed 100 percent payment of sick pay under collective agreements.

No one should believe the assurances of SPD and other politicians that they will not touch sick pay. This promise is

only valid until the election due on February 23.

It is no coincidence that the attack on a cornerstone of the social security system is taking place after the collapse of the coalition government and the return of Donald Trump to the White House. As the WSWS wrote, Trump "declared war on the world and the working class" at his inauguration. Since then, not a day goes by without him issuing new military threats and announcing new attacks on social and democratic rights.

The ruling elites in Germany and Europe are responding by declaring war on the working class themselves and by rearming at a rate not seen since Hitler. All parties in the federal election campaign agree on this.

While Friedrich Merz of the CDU declares that Germany must "assume leadership responsibility for Europe," Robert Habeck of the Greens is calling for a tripling of German military spending. This sum corresponds to nine times the health budget for 2024, which has already been cut several times.

Boris Pistorius of the SPD is calling for an increase of 3 percent. Sahra Wagenknecht's BSW has announced in its election programme the goal of "re-establishing the Bundeswehr as an exclusively defensive army" and for this it must be "adequately equipped." Alice Weidel of the AfD has spoken out in favour of increasing military spending to 5 percent, i.e., almost half the federal budget.

At the same time, the number of billionaires is constantly increasing and share prices are climbing from record to record. The money for armaments and the further enrichment of the already wealthy must be squeezed out of the workers. For this reason, all established parties are preparing to roll back the living and working conditions of the working class to the 19th century. The attack on sick pay fits seamlessly into the profit-before-life policy of the ruling elite's coronavirus pandemic.



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