

Covid-19 pandemic Germany and Austria: the good European pupils of the Covid-19 crisis?

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Once again, Germany appears in this crisis as the good European pupil: a relatively low number of deaths despite a higher number of official cases than in France, without “hard” confinement, and a government which appears to be a rather good manager. Its Austrian neighbour has even managed in recent days to “flatten” the famous curve and is considering the first measures of deconfinement. So can they claim to be “top of the class” in Europe?

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The first country to have transmitted the virus onto European soil, Germany was at first distinguished by uncoordinated and chaotic reactions taken regionally, without national measures. Since then, the model adopted boasts of being almost equivalent to South Korea (vaccinated in a certain way by the SARS epidemic): many tests, and measures of physical distancing. By Sunday 12 April 2020, there were indeed “only” 2,871 dead for 125,000 cases, against more than 12,000 out of 130,000 in France!

Figures to be handled with care

These figures are, however, to be handled with care, when we see that France passes ahead of or behind Germany according to the upswing or otherwise of cases in residential care homes for the elderly. As German virologist and government adviser Christian Drosten explains, the “low” mortality rate is mainly due to the number of tests, which swells the confirmed cases. We are far from a massive Korean screening, especially since PRC tests are unreliable if they are only done once. German rail workers are astounded at the disinfections of Wuhan station or Korean buses, which is far from the DIY that they experience on a daily basis.

If the dismantling of the health system also affects Germany, with 39% fewer public hospitals between 1991 and 2007, there are still eight intensive care beds per 1,000 inhabitants, against six in France (which, in addition to the wealth of the country, is probably also explained by a stronger demographic decline). And beware of optimism: if we take the hundred confirmed cases as day 1, the German curve follows that of Italy, eight days late, with proportionately fewer cases, but far from good mirrored management.

In Austria, the situation seems to have improved for several days. While the country experienced its first cases at the same time as France, the first containment measures were taken when there were still only a thousand known cases, which made it possible to trace the contagions.

The small size and relative wealth of the country probably helped, but the unemployment curve jumped: in two weeks, 200,000 unemployed workers were counted, an increase of 50% (which brings unemployment to 12.7%), to which are added around 400,000 people in partial employment. Losing your job so you don't lose your life: is this all that capitalism can offer?

Who will foot the bill?

As is the case everywhere else, the Austrian government has committed itself to gifts to the bourgeoisie, first unlocking 38 billion. In Germany, 550 billion (an amount subsequently increased) has been made available to employers. Hundreds of thousands of workers in large companies, disrupted by supply chain breaks, are on short-time work, paid between 60 and 67% when companies do not supplement. In many sectors which continue to operate, trade union rights, derogations from working time and leave rights are commonplace.

So there is a question mark hanging over the good crisis management of these countries. What is certain is that the leaders of these countries, if they boast - albeit still cautiously for Germany - of a relatively good management of the mortality of Covid-19, are passing on the cost so that workers - and they alone - should pay, losing their jobs and their wages. Not to mention that the widescale breaches of employment law may be precedents, heralding a worse outcome. And without forgetting either that the same bill of billions given to employers will soon be presented to the German and Austrian working class. Enough to provoke one hell of a backlash.

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P.S.

- International Viewpoint. 20 april 2020:
<http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article6537>