

No work without protection! Berlin transport worker issues appeal for independent workers committees

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The following statement was issued by Andy Niklaus, a worker at the Berliner Verkehrsbetriebe BVG (Berlin Transport Company) and a member of the SGP, the German section of International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). Since its publication on March 26, the statement has found a strong response from transport workers in Berlin and throughout Germany.

Millions of people worldwide risk contracting the highly dangerous coronavirus. The pandemic has revealed the merciless and inhuman character of capitalist society and the nation-state system on which it is based. Governments around the world are endangering the lives and health of working people in a criminal fashion.

The Berlin Senate, composed of the SPD (Social Democratic Party), the Greens and the Left Party, has displayed a particularly arrogant and contemptuous attitude towards the needs of the working class. The Senate allowed schools and day-care centres to stay open for a particularly long time and has failed to take any comprehensive measures to protect public service workers.

This is very obvious in the case of the Berlin Transport Company (BVG), which is responsible for all large-scale transport services in the German capital. Under condition where the coronavirus spread rapidly throughout Germany and Berlin, we were forced to drive crowded buses and trains without any personal protective equipment (PPE). We had to transport workers to factories carrying out non-essential work, factories that should have been closed long ago.

This situation has not fundamentally changed. Many workers still travel to offices, schools and factories, including public sector services, even though home working is possible and unnecessary work is being carried out. Rudimentary protective measures for drivers and passengers were only implemented after massive protests and a growing number of workers reported sick. These completely inadequate measures remain in force.

The situation at the BVG

Only after the number of infections had skyrocketed was the decision made on March 12 to close the front access doors on

buses. Instead of Plexiglas or similar protective measures, a mere strip of red and white tape was stretched to separate drivers from passengers—a measure that does little to protect the drivers of overcrowded buses.

On March 18, regular services were scaled down on the instructions of BVG management, thereby increasing the risk of infection for drivers and passengers in overcrowded vehicles. The scaling down of services was then partially reversed following vigorous protests by passengers.

In order to pacify angry BVG workers and passengers, management introduced some minor health-control measures, which in no way corresponded to the risks facing employees.

Drivers were allocated face masks that fail, however, to meet the standards necessary to combat the coronavirus. The World Health Organization has warned against the use of these masks, explaining they provided a false sense of security.

The masks actually increase the risk to drivers rather than enhancing their security. Co-workers also often receive new masks only every two days. The official instructions assert we should put the masks on, but then take them off if passengers ask questions or we are required to assist them.

A similar false sense of security prevails in regard to the cleaning of vehicles. Learner BVG drivers and reserve workers have been instructed to clean vehicles at depots and at some final destinations since March 7. These workers are not professional cleaners, nor do they work with the disinfectants necessary to reliably remove the virus from surfaces. BVG spokeswoman Petra Nelken even had the nerve to tell Radio Berlin Brandenburg that vehicles would not be disinfected because they would only be re-contaminated. The same outrageous argument could be used to justify ignoring every health and cleaning measure.

There has also been no improvement to the already poor hygienic conditions existing in toilets at bus turning points. At some terminal stations drivers can no longer even wash their hands properly. Soap and paper towel dispensers are often empty, and there are no disinfectants available. At the same time there is no testing of drivers, which is necessary to contain the virus.

Build independent workers' committees!

The red-red-green (Social Democratic Party–Left Party–Greens) Senate and BVG management are only able to continue this irresponsible and criminal policy, which encourages mass contagion, because they are supported by the unions. The public service union Verdi is doing everything it can to suppress the anger of workers and force them to work even under dangerous conditions.

Verdi and the German Federation of Trade Unions (DGB) high-handedly responded to workers who asked about the lack of protection as follows: “It is part of the general risks in life, whether at work or during leisure time, that one can injure oneself or contract an illness. This also applies to employees with a pre-existing medical condition which, although it does not make them unable to work, places them at greater risk of developing a more severe course of the disease following a coronavirus infection.”

In fact, there are many older BVG workers and those with a previous medical condition at risk of severe illness or even death from the disease. The lives of these co-workers and all of our relatives are evidently a matter of utter indifference to both the unions and management.

To protect their health and that of passengers, transport workers must organise independently of the unions and conduct a united struggle against the Senate and management. All over the world, workers are starting to fight back and demanding safe working conditions. To achieve this, they have to join forces internationally. This applies in particular to public transport.

In Detroit bus drivers at the city’s transport companies took the initiative against the policy of the management and unions by reporting sick en masse and not turning up for work—as part of their fight for basic security measures. Similar developments are taking place in New York.

Independent workers’ committees must insist on the following basic demands against the conspiracy of the government, companies and trade unions:

- No work without testing and adequate protective measures!
- The cancellation of regular driving schedules to be replaced by specially equipped buses capable of being properly disinfected. The buses should be manned by specially protected personnel to transport key medical, public service, food and shop workers from their residences to place of work.
- Full wage compensation, regardless of infection or health, for all those affected by short-time working, workplace closures or other wage losses caused by the pandemic!
- Billions of euros to be immediately invested into health care to expand treatment capacity and protect workers.
- Special protective measures for the elderly, prisoners, homeless people and refugees in unsanitary camps!

For a socialist answer to the pandemic

These demands must be part of a broad movement of the entire working class. Just as the safety of our buses and trains is of the utmost importance for the health of all workers, we can only protect ourselves and our families on the basis of massive efforts by society as a whole. A serious fight against the coronavirus pandemic must focus on the interests of the broad masses of the population, not the profits of the wealthy few.

We are a long way from achieving this. The ruthlessness of the red-red-green Senate is part and parcel of the criminal behaviour of the entire ruling class. The country’s privatised and crippled health system lacks the most necessary protective materials. Its employees are continually on the verge of collapse even in times of normal operation.

But instead of investing hundreds of billions in the construction of new hospitals and intensive care units to save lives, €600 billion are being made available to the banks and corporations. Small and medium-sized enterprises, in which 58 percent of all employees paying social security contributions work, will receive just €50 billion. Ordinary workers are being forced to accept short-time working allowance and many have to forego up to 40 percent of their salary. Hundreds of thousands are unable to pay their rent and face life on the streets.

The capitalists are not only prepared to play with workers’ lives in order to protect their wealth, they are also using the crisis to increase their fortunes. Now the talk in official circles revolves around how to force workers back to the job, thereby accepting mass infections and deaths to maximise the profits of large companies.

The coronavirus is not the source of the crisis of capitalism. It has only exposed and exacerbated that crisis. It confirms that a social system based on nation states and the private appropriation of social wealth is unable to deal rationally with such a global crisis. That is why the ruling classes are increasingly relying on fascist and authoritarian forms of rule to maintain this irrational and anti-human system.

Under these conditions, an international, democratically controlled economy based on rational planning is an objective necessity. The implementation of such a socialist program, however, requires the overthrow of capitalism and the mobilisation of the international working class.

I therefore call on all my colleagues in the BVG and in other concerns to take up this fight. The building of an international socialist and revolutionary movement is the central issue of our epoch. It is a matter of life and death. Write to me if you want to support the establishment of independent workers’ committees and register today as an active supporter of the Socialist Equality Party (SGP), the German section of the Fourth International.



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