

# Munich tram drivers speak out on dangerous conditions during coronavirus pandemic

Our reporters  
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The coronavirus continues to infect thousands every day in Germany and tens of thousands worldwide. According to official figures, the total number of people infected with the virus in Munich as of Tuesday was over 4,700. Up to 100 new cases are being reported in the Bavarian capital every day, and experts assume that the peak of new infections in Germany has not yet been reached.

Despite these worrying numbers and reports of the aggressive spread of the virus, which has killed more than 3,800 in Germany, public transport drivers remain at risk every day. WSWS reporters spoke at the start of April with two tram drivers employed by the Munich Transport Company (MVG) about their current work situation. The WSWS previously reported on the situation facing bus drivers working for the Berliner Verkehrsbetriebe (BVG).

Tram driver W. told WSWS reporters about an info leaflet on the COVID-19 crisis sent out by the MVG on April 1. The memo states that surfaces do not need to be disinfected by drivers. The same applies to the drivers' cabs, which are purportedly cleaned regularly and comprehensively. Driver W., however, described the condition of drivers' cabs as "terrifying." He said: "Every time I took over a vehicle and wiped the most important switches and surfaces with a disinfectant cloth, the cloth was completely black with dirt afterwards."

W. also reported on the lack of precautions to separate drivers from passengers in a number of older vehicles: "There are still about 20 type R2 tramcars in Munich. Like buses they do not have a separate driver's cab. We were told to close the curtain between passenger and driver in order to protect ourselves from the virus during the day; normally we are only allowed to do this at night." The curtain is only intended as a

privacy screen.

The driver went on to say that the front door of vehicles was closed to passengers. Across Germany a thin red and white ribbon had been put up in trams to separate drivers and passengers for their mutual protection. However, these limited measures were lifted a short time later by the MVG.

"The next day, a plexiglass window was installed to protect drivers in the R2 trams, but there was at least 5 cm of space at the sides, so one cannot speak of effective protection because the virus could still easily pass through," W. noted. "A sticker saying 'Please do not speak to the driver' when someone is standing next to you and coughing, or if the driver is infected, is no help."

His fellow worker Z. reported on a campaign launched by the MVG to thank tram, bus and subway drivers for their efforts during the pandemic. In line with the campaign drivers were requested to send photos of themselves at work. These were then compiled into a collage and with the phrase "You keep Munich running. Thank you!" The picture was disseminated on social media, by local newspapers and also by the city edition of the *Bild*.

Z. welcomed the fact that drivers had received public recognition but added: "Practical solutions [from the employer's side] are far too few. We have to take our own measures to protect ourselves by buying disinfectants, masks, etc. There is usually disinfectant in the break rooms, on the toilets and in the canteens, but we need more. We receive practically nothing, basically zero."

W. added: "It's good that we are thanked in the newspapers. Unfortunately, we drivers cannot buy safer working conditions with such recognition."

The WSWS reporters informed the two tram drivers

of fellow bus drivers in Detroit who had organised a “sick-out” in mid-March due to the risks they faced from the coronavirus. Nearly the entire workforce reported sick at the same time to enforce their demands. After a mere 10 percent of the workforce reported to work in Detroit, public transport in the city had to be called to a halt.

When asked about the possibility of obtaining better working conditions in Munich, Z replied: “I see this as an opportunity, but it is sad when things have to go this far. We employees are the ones who bring the money in. With all due respect for all other types of work, if it wasn’t for us drivers, many others couldn’t do their job.”

His colleague added that he saw this as a good opportunity to make their employer aware of the seriousness of the situation: “It’s about lives, our lives are being played with. Too little is being done to protect us from the virus.”

W. said he had heard of dozens of deaths in New York’s public transport company and several deaths in London, and remarked: “We always inform drivers on the bulletin board of workers who have died, i.e., former colleagues, or even those who were still working. What about pictures of the many drivers who have died from the coronavirus? And in a such a very short time.”

Both W. and Z. agreed that more has to be done for the safety of MVG drivers, but also drivers across Germany and worldwide. “Firstly, the workplace should be equipped to minimise the risk of infection. Secondly, we should be paid a premium and this should also be paid to workers in other industries, especially in healthcare. We can only achieve this if we act together. On our own the situation looks bleak for MVG employees,” Z. said.

The reports of the two tram drivers illustrate the irresponsible actions of the MVG management. As for the drivers’ unions, Verdi and NahVG, they have responded merely with pious words, despite the tense situation in Munich.

For example, in its info leaflet on the coronavirus NahVG demands that transport companies across Germany take adequate measures to protect their employees. It also says that workers should not be exposed to an unnecessarily high risk of infection due to economic interests. The absence of any action from

the NahVG, however, means that the union is reneging on its own responsibility to ensure safe working conditions, thereby accepting that drivers could be infected with the virus.

In order to better protect themselves and their passengers, tram, bus and subway drivers in Munich must fight to establish independent workers’ committees to enforce the following demands:

- No work without testing for COVID-19 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! Write to us today if you support the establishment of independent workers committees and register as an active supporter of the Socialist Equality Party (SGP), the German section of the Fourth International.



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