

UK police question suspect in spitting incident that led to rail worker's death

Michael Barnes
19 May 2020

Police are questioning a 57-year-old man accused of spitting on two members of staff at London Victoria train station, while shouting that he had the coronavirus. Both subsequently caught COVID-19. Belly Mujinga, a 47-year-old mother with an 11-year-old daughter, died two weeks later.

Belly started her shift at Victoria Station booking office on March 22. She and her work colleague were ordered by a supervisor on to the concourse of one of the UK's busiest stations. Witnesses testify that Belly appealed to the supervisor that it was dangerous without personal protective equipment (PPE), telling him that she had an underlying respiratory condition. The two workers were forced outside, regardless.

Shortly after, a man approached, shouted that he had coronavirus and spat at them. Even after suffering this traumatic incident, Belly and her colleague were again forced back on to the concourse. Eyewitnesses said she was trembling.

Belly's husband Lusamba explained, "The man said he had the virus and spat on them. They reported it to their supervisor. Belly came home and told me everything."

Belly's colleague explained, "We begged not to go out. We said, 'Our lives are in danger.'... We were told that we are not even allowed to put on masks." The colleague said of Belly's employer: "Govia has behaved reckless and negligent. They have failed in their duty of care. We are treated like we are robots."

On April 2, Belly was admitted to Barnet General Hospital. After being put on a ventilator, she died on April 5. Lusamba told AP that on the day she died, he had made a video call. "I thought she might be asleep, but the doctor phoned me to tell me she had died," he said. "She was a good person, a good mother, and a good wife. She was a caring person and would take

care of everybody."

Belly's cousin Agnes Ntumba told reporters, "They should not have made her work on the concourse. ... She shouldn't have died in this condition. We could have prevented it, if she had more PPE or if they kept her inside instead of being on the concourse."

The sociopathic behaviour of Belly Mujinga's assailant has understandably produced a horrified reaction among rail workers and an outpouring of sympathy in the working class. By Monday, an online fund set up to raise money for Belly's funeral—which took place April 29—had raised £40,352. But the deranged character of the attack has also solicited an outpouring of crocodile tears from those who are ultimately responsible for creating the conditions that led to Belly Mujinga's death.

A rail worker at Victoria Station told press that since the publicity around Belly's death, workers had been given face masks. "There's not much being done to check all the staff, today is the first day we have had masks." A security guard added, "I think they're trying to cover themselves. This should have been done right at the beginning." Since Belly's death, he had become "much more scared" and that lifting the lockdown was "stupid."

Angie Doll, managing director of Southern Railway and Gatwick Express, which is owned by Govia, trotted out the same statements used by London bus companies to absolve themselves of responsibility for not providing Belly and her colleagues with PPE, stating, "We follow the latest government advice." She said nothing about Belly's supervisor ignoring the existence of an underlying health condition. Moreover, according to workers at Victoria Station, anyone purchasing their own mask was actively discouraged from using it.

In a BBC interview, Conservative Transport

Secretary Grant Shapps justified the same government advice cited by Doll, declaring, “This is not a question of PPE, it’s just disgusting and I know that the British Transport Police are investigating.”

He was not confronted by the BBC with the fact that Belly was infected on March 20, three days before the government finally imposed a lockdown after weeks of refusing to do so and openly pursuing a policy of “herd immunity” with the stated aim that as many people as possible should get the virus. This same indifference to human life has created the conditions for many more rail workers to become infected.

Responsibility for Belly’s tragic fate is shared by her trade union, the Transport Salaried Staff Association (TSSA).

TSSA General Secretary Manuel Cortes said in a statement reeking with complacency, “We are shocked and devastated at Belly’s death. She is one of far too many front-line workers who have lost their lives to coronavirus.”

The TSSA stated, “As a vulnerable person in the ‘at-risk’ category, and her condition known to her employer, there are questions about why she wasn’t stood down from front-line duties early on in this pandemic.”

Yet, in the absence of any such measures by the company, what did the TSSA do? Did they instruct their officials to draw up a list of vulnerable members, for example? Did they demand PPE for their members? They did not.

The spitting incident on March 22 was not even reported on the TSSA’s website, nor was Belly’s hospitalisation and her death on April 5. On April 7, two days after Belly’s death, the TSSA website posted, “Government Must ‘Wake Up’ Over Rail Workers’ Safety.” The TSSA criticised Transport Minister Chris Heaton-Harris’s statement to the Commons Transport Committee that railway booking offices should stay open and gate-line staff maintained for “revenue protection.”

Cortes commented, “We really can’t have Ministers behaving like World War One generals using our members as cannon fodder. They should be ashamed of themselves. ... Let’s get real—in the face of an unprecedented public health emergency all that matters is saving and protecting lives. There is a pressing need to get booking office staff and other staff—such as those

working at gate-lines—out of harm’s way.”

Again, Belly’s death was not mentioned. And neither the TSSA, nor the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT), nor the train drivers’ union ASLEF have taken any action to defend their members from the life-threatening policies of the employers and the government.

The first mention of Belly’s death on the TSSA’s website is a May 13 statement, “Death of a ticket office worker.” The statement details the horrifying sequence of events on that day, before reporting that the TSSA has referred the case to the Railway Inspectorate!

Cortes also asked Health Secretary Matt Hancock to extend the scheme whereby surviving families of health workers who died from the pandemic are given a miserly £60,000—to the families of all front-line workers who perish trying to keep our country and vital services going.”

The TSSA and other rail unions are only verbally opposing the brutal return-to-work drive by the Johnson government, while allowing their members to be exposed without any serious protections in place.

On May 14, the TSSA welcomed the Johnson government’s bailout package for Transport for London (TfL), which is conditional on the implementation of the back-to-work drive. The *World Socialist Web Site* drew attention to one of its most disturbing conditions—that the government must be provided a list of all those who are absent from work. This will open the door to the state-sponsored victimisation of sick workers, many with similar underlying health conditions to Belly Mujinga.

To donate to Belly Mujinga’s family visit here.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact