

French bus driver left brain-dead after asking passengers to wear masks

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A bus driver in the southern French city of Bayonne has been left brain-dead from a brutal assault, after he ordered a group of passengers to either wear masks or get off the bus, on Sunday evening.

According to police accounts, the driver, Philippe Monguillot, 59 years old, was attacked by one or multiple passengers at a stop. He had told one passenger attempting to get on the bus that he would not be allowed on without wearing a coronavirus mask, which is required by law on public transport. At the same stop he reportedly told three other passengers on the bus that they would have to get off if they did not put on masks.

After the assault, Monguillot was transported unconscious to a hospital and placed on life support, but was declared brain-dead. He has a wife and three adult daughters. On Sunday, a 34-year-old man was placed under arrest and remains in police custody. Four other men were arrested on Monday, one of whom is a minor and has subsequently been released. The prosecutor reported last night that two men would be charged with intentional murder.

On Monday, the bus drivers at Chronoplus, where Monguillot worked, announced that they were on strike until after Monguillot's funeral service. Chronoplus serves bus routes in Bayonne, Anglet and Biarritz, a sea-side resort on the south-west Atlantic coast of France. Routes in all three areas were stopped on yesterday. The drivers are demanding greater protection.

The bus unions met with Chronoplus management on Monday evening, and are seeking to reach a deal to end the strike and return drivers to work.

Yesterday Macron administration's minister for transport, Jean-Baptiste Djebbari, travelled to Bayonne and spoke with drivers, cynically proclaiming the government's grief at the tragic incident.

These crocodile tears will not make anyone forget that the Macron administration's policies are directly responsible for tens of thousands of deaths throughout the pandemic.

At the beginning of the pandemic, while telling lies to the population that the virus was unlikely to reach France, the government refused to organize any large-scale testing. Because it had organized no testing infrastructure, it insisted that testing was unnecessary. Those who presented with symptoms to their local doctor were told they probably had the virus should go home and self-isolate.

The government declared that wearing masks was unnecessary, trying to cover up the fact that it had destroyed its stock of masks over the previous decade in order to cut health care costs. Government spokeswoman Sibeth Ndiaye contemptuously announced on March 20, "You know what? I don't know how to use a mask."

The ending of the lock-down on May 11, the restarting of public transport, and the full reopening of the economy, has been determined by the economic demands of the capitalists for a resumption of profit-making activities.

Whatever protective measures existed for workers in the immediate aftermath of the lock-down have since been ended. On June 24, Labor Minister Muriel Pénicaud released a new set of guidelines for employers, no longer requiring a four square-meter surface area allocation for each employee. This has been replaced with a non-binding "guide" recommending one meter of separation, with the requirement of wearing a mask if even this cannot be maintained.

At the same time, schools, restaurants and bars have all been reopened.

The trade unions and the government maintain no central list of the number of bus drivers or public transport workers who have been infected or died from the coronavirus. But between March and April the Paris-area public transport operator (RATP) had confirmed four deaths in that region alone. On May 12, the head of RATP Catherine Gouillouard admitted that nine RATP employees had died from the coronavirus. Bus drivers reported receiving no masks at all, and only one pair of gloves per shift.

Between June 30 and July 3, three coronavirus infections were detected among RATP maintenance workers in workshops in Javel, located in Paris' 15th district. The site employs more than 70 workers.

Responsibility for this situation lies above all with the General Confederation of Labor (CGT) and the other trade unions. They have worked to suppress workers' anger over the lack of protective equipment and safe conditions for bus and public transport workers.



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