

Berlin, Germany transport worker dies of COVID-19

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It was revealed on January 2 that an employee of the Berlin Transport Company (BVG) died of COVID-19 on December 30. The *Berliner Zeitung* reported news of death, which had been made public via Facebook.

The BVG management had not officially announced the death of the long-time employee and only responded after media inquiries. BVG spokeswoman Petra Nelken then confirmed the death to the *Berliner Zeitung*, stating that the victim was 49-year-old Sven B., who worked as a streetcar driver at the Marzahn depot in eastern Berlin.

The company spokeswoman went to some lengths to deny any responsibility on BVG's part for Sven B.'s infection and death. "From what we know, the employee contracted the infection in his home environment, outside of work," she said. That was evident, she claimed, from the fact that the health department responsible for the case did not impose quarantine obligations on the man's colleagues. She did not provide any information about when Sven B. tested positive and why any infection of his fellow workers and other contacts could be ruled out.

The *Berliner Zeitung* report only says: "On December 17, [Sven] is said to have gone into quarantine at home. The reason was apparently that a family member had contracted the virus, as shown by a coronavirus test. The BVG employee subsequently became increasingly unwell. According to reports, he was finally admitted to a hospital. He died there on December 30."

Nelken insisted that mass transit was not a hotspot of contagion, neither for staff nor passengers. The state-owned transport group employs about 15,500 people. "Based on that figure, the number of corona infections in our company is low," the BVG spokeswoman said.

When asked, however, Nelken had to concede that from March 2020, when the pandemic was approaching

its first peak, up until today, 245 BVG employees have tested positive for the virus. Another 335 employees have gone into quarantine, she said. "We currently have 21 cases of infection and another 33 BVGers are in quarantine," the spokeswoman said. Among them, she said, are five bus drivers, three subway drivers and two streetcar workers, who have all contracted COVID-19.

It is the first time these numbers have been disclosed. Until now, all information about infections in the company was kept secret by BVG management, the works council and the Verdi trade union. Even the company's safety officer did not pass on information to staff. Given this systematic cover-up, there are reasonable doubts that the current information is accurate.

The BVG spokeswoman's claim that the company had done much to reduce the risk of infection is an outright lie, contradicted by her own statements. For example, Nelken stated that vehicles were now being cleaned more frequently than in the past: "Cleaning supplies have been distributed to staff." In fact, regular basic cleaning of all vehicles by a competent specialised company does not take place and the cleaning agent workers have to use for their vehicles is itself highly hazardous to health.

Entry-exit routes for staff have been re-marked to avoid encounters, Nelken explained. However, this does not change the fact that the necessary distance rules cannot be observed in canteens and recreation rooms. The company continues to reject demands for changes to shift schedules that are designed to ensure the safety of drivers and other employees.

Nelken then announced that the BVG has also begun to install glass panels in around 1,500 buses to provide additional protection for drivers. "We want to be finished with this at the end of February," she said.

According to the company press office, however, the installation of the glass panels had been planned a long time ago and originally had nothing at all to do with COVID-19.

Now, almost a year after the outbreak of the dangerous coronavirus pandemic, this measure is being sold as protection for drivers, which will still take two months to complete. In fact, the main purpose of the protective windows is to reopen the front doors of the vehicles as quickly as possible in order to start selling tickets again.

The fact that the “Head of the Company’s Media Staff,” as is Nelken’s official title, celebrates this delayed installation of protective windows as a health protection measure is typical of the arrogance of a municipal management that has been lining its pockets for years without showing the slightest interest in the health and welfare of staff and passengers.

BVG policy, which endangers the lives and health of the workers, is supported by the Berlin Senate consisting of the SPD, the Greens and the Left Party. This red-red-green state government shows an especially arrogant and contemptuous attitude towards the concerns of the working class. It left schools and day-care centres open for a particularly long time and to this day has failed to take any comprehensive measures to protect public workers.

The death of Sven B. is a result of this inhuman and irresponsible policy, which places economic interests and profits above the health and lives of the population.

A look at developments at BVG so far makes this very clear. I write this as someone who has been a bus and commuter rail driver at BVG for nearly three decades. Even as the coronavirus first began to spread rapidly through Germany and Berlin, we were forced to drive crowded buses and trains through the streets without serious protective measures. We had to bring workers to factories that should have been closed long ago because they were not key to maintaining food and health services.

That has not fundamentally changed to this day. In the public sector, many workers have to travel to offices, schools and plants to carry out non-essential work even though home-based work is also possible. Rudimentary protective measures for drivers and passengers were only implemented after massive protests and a growing number of sick leave

notifications. Such measures remain completely inadequate.

The red-red-green Senate and BVG management can only carry out this irresponsible policy of mass contagion with the support of the unions. The public service union Verdi is doing everything it can to suppress all opposition to the official pandemic policy and staff work even under the most dangerous of conditions.

This state of affairs underlines the need to build independent action committees that take the fight for safe working conditions and against the Senate and management into their own hands. I therefore call on all BVG colleagues and other sections of workers to participate in this struggle. Write to the WSWS if you want to support the building of workers’ committees independent of the unions and relate your own experiences. And make the decision to become a member of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP), the German section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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