

After COVID-19 kills tram driver in Berlin, transit workers in Germany demand more security

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17 January 2021

Following the tragic death of 49-year-old tram driver Sven B. from COVID-19 in Berlin on December 30, a growing number transportation workers are calling for improved safety measures.

In Berlin and many other cities, the pandemic is getting ever further out of control. The responsibility for this is borne by the completely reckless policy of the Berlin state government consisting of the Social Democrats (SPD), the Greens, and the Left Party, which makes its decisions in the interest of the business associations and places profit above the health and lives of the population.

Every day, the 15,000 employees of the Berlin transport association BVG and tens of thousands of passengers risk infection with the coronavirus. The driving personnel of BVG and its subsidiary BT are on duty day and night without adequate protection. Neither the shift schedules, nor the safety measures for the drivers, nor the cleaning of the trains and buses have been adapted to the dramatic intensification of the pandemic.

Everyone is aware of the rising number of infections, which is growing more alarming every day. Just last weekend, the seven-day incidence, the number of weekly infections per 100,000 inhabitants, rose from 130 to nearly 200. The situation in hospitals continues to worsen dramatically, with intensive care beds becoming scarce and a shortage of qualified nurses. Bodies are piling up outside intensive care units in hospitals. In the first days of the new year, more than 200 people died of coronavirus in Berlin.

Since the death of their BVG colleague, resistance has been growing among transportation workers. A whole year has passed without the management making even the slightest effort to seriously improve occupational safety. But the workers' anger is not only directed toward the board of the municipal company, which is known above all for collecting excessive salaries. Longtime BVG boss Sigrid Nikutta took in half a million euro a year before she switched to the Bundesbahn (the state train company) a year

ago.

Even the drivers union, Verdi, is doing nothing to improve the increasingly intolerable situation of its members. Verdi functionaries and staff councils are closely linked to the Senate parties and support their reactionary policies. Verdi ensures that public transport is maintained under the catastrophic conditions of the pandemic.

The WSWS spoke this week with bus drivers from the Müllerstraße depot about the increasingly impossible situation they confront every day. Names have been changed to prevent reprisals.

Andy B., a bus driver since 2006, was horrified by the death of Sven B.:

“The death of our colleague really affects me. It is tragic, and BVG should have to take over all the costs, immediately pay his outstanding salary and the funeral costs. After all, there is no way of knowing for sure whether he was infected at work in the vehicle, at home or somewhere else.

“In any case, there has been no follow-up at BVG, just as there have been no tests to date. There have already been coronavirus cases that we discovered ourselves. At the beginning of December, there was a positive test of a dispatcher at the Müllerstraße depot, but not everyone was sent home then, only the person affected and not his group colleagues who worked several shifts together with him, in the same room for eight hours at a time. And at that point without masks!”

Another incident shows how BVG ignores the risk of passengers and drivers becoming infected. No mask checks are organized in the far too few, and therefore overcrowded, buses. The drivers are supposed to oversee the mask obligation but have no recourse against those refusing to wear one.

Andy B. told about five colleagues who refused to drive because there were too many people on the bus without masks. However, the operations control centre instructed them to continue driving under threat of punishment.

“You’re protected fine, drive or go home right now.”

Vehicles are still not disinfected; fewer than 10 percent of vehicles are washed with soap, employees of the Sasse cleaning company report. “Then we get disinfectant, which you can’t use for long because it’s hazardous to your health,” Andy B. explained. “As far as protection goes, all I can say is there’s been no real cleaning of the vehicles since the pandemic started.”

In early March, BVG had planned to install new glass panels on the driver’s door of its 1,500 buses, but not for protection against the virus. To this, Andy B. said:

“Now they’re taking the plastic sheets down and just putting caution tape right behind the driver. There is no longer a minimum distance of 1.5 metres. How is the driver protected? It’s been proven that the new glass doesn’t keep coronavirus out! So what does every other driver do? We take the caution tape, which we’re not allowed to do according to the service instructions, and move it back one row of seats, and feel a little safer.”

When colleagues want to protect themselves and others, the BVG prevents them. Andy B. tells of a colleague whose wife is the director of a daycare centre in Hennigsdorf. It is always said that “children don’t have coronavirus.” In the daycare centre, “a teacher and two children tested positive for COVID-19. As a result, she was sent home and the daycare centre was closed. Our colleague informed his service management, since it is reportable, and asked if he should stay at home in quarantine. They turned this down.”

“We employees always have to report,” Andy B. concluded. “But the company doesn’t tell us when colleagues die of coronavirus or get sick! They also don’t call us and ask if you had anything to do with the sick colleague.”

During the collective bargaining disputes for better working conditions last year, Verdi, in the midst of the pandemic, did not even broach the subject of protection against infection. Instead, the union made sure that full buses took students and workers to schools and workplaces all over Germany.

“Now, Verdi has postponed negotiations for a collective wage agreement until the middle of this year. I see the few hundred euro Corona premium as blood money, with which they want to calm us down. Besides, it’s far too little compared to what we’ve already lost through good masks that we didn’t get from the company and had to buy ourselves. We should not have accepted this at all. FFP2 masks should have to be provided for all employees.

“We have to make a new organisation and strike with our colleagues in the large plants at BMW and Siemens. We should hang up posters saying: ‘Only when you have done everything possible to protect us will we go back to work.’

“That’s exactly what the old organisations like Verdi don’t demand, they don’t do anything. They don’t help us with their staff councils; they represent their own interests. Verdi and the staff councils are the same. Everything is dragged out. The ones who suffer are always the workers, the employees, who get bad services or get sick from hard work. Either you do what we demand or you can go, they say. We need to form action committees to regroup and start the fight!”

Regarding the Berlin Senate, Andy B. said: “The current parties don’t represent us workers. We need a new party that will listen to us and represent our interests. It has to be a real workers’ party. By workers for workers. I’m for a hard lockdown, because what they’ve done so far is the biggest humbug. Everybody should have to stay home.”

Alex W., who has been a bus driver for BVG for two years, also spoke to the WSWS about his concerns:

“I feel cheated by government policy and am in favour of a hard lockdown, where everything is tight. They have no plan. I see the same thing at BVG. Here the representatives of Verdi are also on the supervisory boards. They are in the same boat. So, I’m sure they decided on the Corona bonus to calm us down. Like a tranquilizer pill.”

Alex W. also spoke out against the new glass panes as protection against the virus:

“The new glass on the buses is a joke! Every smoker knows that the aerosols penetrate the room. That’s not protection, and then they also ban us from wearing masks. We desperately need cleaning teams after every trip to disinfect every vehicle. I was in the hall the other night, and they were only washing the outside of the vehicles, not the inside. But coronavirus doesn’t take a break!

“I am sad about the death of our colleague. The company pension should be given to his wife, she should get the widow’s pension. That would be appropriate. I’m sure more will catch it. That’s why we need to reorganise. The SPD has not been a workers party for a long time. We need someone to represent us again, the working class. This is the only way social issues will ever be central.

“We should protest and close everything down at 12:00 with all our working class colleagues. This is the only way to stop coronavirus in 2021.”



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