

Stop front boarding on Berlin buses—prepare strike action!

Transport Workers' Action Committee for Safe Workplaces (Germany)
30 April 2021

The following statement by the Transport Workers' Action Committee for Safe Workplaces was distributed widely at bus depots in Berlin, Germany. As a result of the massive public opposition, the reintroduction of front boarding was delayed.

Dear colleagues,

The decision of the Berliner Verkehrsbetriebe (BVG, Berlin Transit Company) management to reintroduce front boarding on buses next Monday, despite rising infection figures, is a deliberate provocation and must not be allowed. The health and lives of bus drivers and BVG workers stand higher than the profit interests of the BVG board and the Social Democratic Party (SPD)/Left Party/Green Party Senate (state executive).

The third coronavirus wave is in full swing. In Berlin, more than 165,000 people have been infected since the beginning of the pandemic, including at least 340 of our colleagues. More than 3,200 Berliners have died, and over 82,000 nationwide, including Sven B., a tram driver, and our colleague from the Cicero-Strasse bus depot. Covid illnesses are also increasing among the employees of the Sasse company, who clean our vehicles.

We must not allow more dead and sick people!

Like teachers, educators, doctors, nurses, emergency services, sales staff, and refuse workers, we public transport workers are particularly at risk of infection. Many studies show that the confined spaces on buses and trains, and high passenger volumes, significantly increase the spread of the virus and the risk of infection.

Despite information from management to the contrary, the virus is widespread in the company. The *Berliner Zeitung* wrote on April 24 that “some recent” covid cases were “due to infection routes within BVG.” There were indications that workshop workers at the bus depots Indira-Gandhi-Strasse and Weissensee, but also in the U-Bahn (underground), had been infected at work.

Virologists emphasise that the greatest risk of infection is in closed rooms and call for regular ventilation. But ventilation, “spit screens” and our passengers’ FFP2 masks are not enough to protect us drivers effectively. We do not have sufficient distance to the passengers when they use the front door and sit in the first row of seats behind us!

The catastrophic experiences from public transport in New York and London have shown: Buses and trains carry the danger of coronavirus hotspots!

Our colleagues at the Paris municipal transport company (RATP) resisted the dismantling of the shielding to the passenger compartment, the opening of the front entrance and drivers selling tickets. When the company pushed through the measures anyway, an investigation found that new infections had tripled among Paris’ 16,000 bus drivers. In March alone, there were 307 newly infected bus drivers! In response, a court ruled that the shielding to the passenger compartment had to be rebuilt because the risk of infection was too high.

In Italy, with 300 deaths and 30,000 new infections per day, drivers are fighting in many small strikes and protests for immediate vaccination, for real protection against infection and against the disinfectants used there, which are harmful to health.

In some regions of Italy, all drivers who take sick leave because of intolerance to the disinfectants have their wages halved and are suspended. The aim is to prevent drivers from calling in sick out of protest, disinfectant intolerance, or fear of infection.

There is only one reason why the BVG board wants to enforce front boarding with brute force: profit.

In its usual aggressive manner, the board stressed that front entry was necessary to resume ticket sales. The company made high losses last year because of the pandemic, which had to be compensated by the Senate with 144 million euros.

Behind the state-owned BVG is the Berlin Senate led by the SPD, the Greens and the Left Party. They represent the same reactionary capitalist profits-before-lives policy as the federal government. Economics Senator Ramona Pop of the Greens, who is also chairwoman of the BVG supervisory board, in close co-operation with the Left Party and the SPD, made Eva Kreienkamp the new BVG boss at the beginning of the year to trim the company for profit.

Kreienkamp earned her spurs in management at Allianz Insurance, where she held the position of senior vice president for 10 years before moving, via detours, to the Mainzer Verkehrsgesellschaft (Mainz Transit Company), where she pushed through a drastic rationalisation programme. Now she wants to shake up BVG. The power struggle over front boarding and the hostility towards the workers is the prelude to very far reaching social attacks.

No trust in Verdi and the staff council!

The current protest action by the trade union Verdi cannot hide the fact that the union officials are fully on the side of the management and have long since accepted the front boarding.

A letter from the BO Süd staff council to colleagues dated April 22 merely describes the decision as “premature.” They said they were “examining all legal possibilities.” Instead of calling for a strike against the potentially murderous plan, the Verdi staff council is already working out proposals for its implementation. For example, “services would have to be adjusted” and the “question with the equipment of FFP2 masks” would have to be solved.

Verdi and the Senate parties represent a common front. Their functionaries, including Verdi’s regional head of transport, Jeremy Arndt, sit on the BVG supervisory board, where they have rubber-stamped all decisions against the workforce. The staff council’s signature is on every company agreement on the deterioration of working conditions.

Since the last collective agreement, employees will lose one-twelfth of their annual bonus of 1,200 euros if they are absent for more than six weeks because of the same illness. Six weeks for a covid illness is used up extremely quickly, especially with the health effects of something more severe such as long covid, let alone hospitalisation!

Only a few days ago, the staff council representatives were praising the BVG’s “proportionate” pandemic policy and “care” in chorus with Verdi.

When Arndt describes today’s rally in his WhatsApp call as “a good warm-up for the collective bargaining round,” we should take that as a warning. His opposition to front boarding is pure hypocrisy.

In almost all cities in Germany, the front doors have been open to passengers since mid-2020 without Verdi doing anything about it. Throughout Germany, many bus drivers have fallen ill, and some have died. In Weissenfels (Saxony), for example, two bus routes had to be suspended because traffic could no longer be maintained due to the high covid cases (including two bus drivers who died of coronavirus) among the drivers.

The struggle against the effects of the pandemic, for decent wages and a safe workplace, requires a break with the trade unions and their reactionary “social partnership” with the companies and government.

We created the Action Committee for Safe Workplaces because we are no longer prepared to accept the dangerous working conditions and the systematic cover-up of the infection figures at BVG and other transport companies. We want to organise the growing resistance independently of the establishment parties and trade unions and coordinate it internationally.

We demand:

- Keep the front doors closed, no ticket sales and reinstall the plastic curtains with high-quality fixings!

- No more cover-ups! Immediate disclosure and announcement of all infections within the staff and among the cleaning staff for the BVG vehicles. Immediate notification of all colleagues via the company app.

- High quality and daily disinfection of the vehicles with full protection of the cleaning staff!

- No sanctions against colleagues who do not perform their duties for fear of infection! No harassment of colleagues who talk and share information about safety concerns in person and on social media.

- Immediate and regular mandatory testing for all, free of charge and during working hours, and on-site contact tracing for all depot workers.

- Immediate vaccinations for all employees by BVG company doctors.

We bus drivers and workers in transport and public transport are defenceless against the pandemic worldwide. On all continents, the struggle of our colleagues is growing against the policies of governments and the straitjacket of trade unions who want to stop us from a common, coordinated struggle.

We are in close contact with our colleagues in London, at Cricklewood bus depot, and with workers in other countries.

We welcome the building of an International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, which the International Committee of the Fourth International and the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) are calling for at an online rally on May 1.

The alliance will be a tool for workers around the world to organise a united struggle to push for workers’ protection, the closure of unsafe workplaces and non-essential production facilities, and other emergency measures necessary to stop the spread of the virus.

Contact us and join our Facebook group!

It is time to act! It is not enough to denounce the criminal irresponsibility of employers, government, the establishment parties, and trade unions, it is necessary to fight against it.



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