

Pressure from Berlin bus drivers halts re-introduction of front boarding

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Pressure from workers has led to the Berliner Verkehrsbetriebe (BVG, Berlin Transit Company) postponing the re-introduction of front boarding for the fourth time.

But this postponement is only a tactical retreat. The house union Verdi and the management need more time to better prepare against the drivers. Moreover, the delay does not change the current risk of contagion to which the drivers and the vehicle cleaners are constantly exposed and in which Verdi is not the least interested.

On April 26 in its press release, BVG had officially announced it would re-introduce front boarding and on-bus ticket sales from May 3. Berlin bus drivers responded angrily to this announcement and the claim by the chairperson of the BVG board Eva Kreienkamp that “protective screens,” “cashless” ticket sales and a lot of “ventilation” meant drivers were “safe” and that this was confirmed by a study commissioned by BVG.

The bus drivers’ protest led to angry reactions and cutting comments on social media and triggered a wave of sick-outs. The growing resistance found its sharpest expression in the formation of the “Transport Workers Action Committee for Safe Jobs.”

The action committee’s call —“Stop front boarding on Berlin buses—prepare strike action!”—spread like wildfire. In it, Kreienkamp’s plan is described as a “deliberate provocation.” The action committee also makes concrete demands for the immediate protection of all staff and passengers and warns that “union officials are fully on the side of management” and have long supported front boarding and ticketing.

The growing willingness of drivers to fight back against BVG management plans outside of union control is a serious concern for the house union Verdi, which is facing a steady decline in membership.

Through its staff council representatives in the depots and its influence in the board of directors and supervisory board, Verdi desperately tried to get Kreienkamp and the Social Democratic Party (SPD), Left Party and Green Senate

(Berlin state executive) behind her to give in. For this reason, Verdi department head Jeremy Arndt (himself a member of the supervisory board) organised a protest event at short notice in front of BVG headquarters on Thursday, immediately before a supervisory board meeting.

In front of a few dozen participants and addressing his colleagues on the supervisory board, Arndt stressed: “Of course we are not generally against front boarding.” However, Verdi has a problem with the way this is to be enforced.

The “core” of the current conflict about the plan to begin front boarding and thus the demand of the staff council representatives was, according to Arndt: “On the one hand, to take along the co-determination bodies (employee representatives), which have been completely ignored in the last two weeks!” And on the other hand, “logically, the risk analysis must also be carried out together with the workers’ and employees’ representatives.”

Arndt is attempting to channel bus drivers’ anger over their jobs, which have been completely inadequately protected since the outbreak of the pandemic, into a dead end and focus exclusively on the lack of consultation and a new health and safety report. It should be noted that it is not Verdi commissioning such an expert report to prove the lack of health protection and the increased danger from front boarding, to prevent this and onboard ticket sales until the pandemic is over. Rather, Verdi is demanding an expert report from management to be better able to enforce front boarding against the resistance of the workforce.

In his 12-minute speech, Arndt did not mention the high incidence rate of coronavirus in Berlin, currently at 130 per 100,000, or the more than 340 BVG employees infected so far, or even the two colleagues who have paid for the murderous herd immunity policy with their lives. In the meantime, information from workers points to five dead employees!

On the other hand, Arndt was agitated that Kreienkamp’s actions were destroying the good divide-and-rule policy between the supervisory board and Verdi. We must not

allow a split between us and the board, he said. “BVG has too long a tradition of co-determination for that. We have enjoyed social partnership over the years, despite all the disputes.”

BVG employees know only too well what that looks like! More than 10 years ago, Verdi ensured the conclusion of the 2005 collective agreement on local transport (TV-N), which was based on a deal between the union and the then SPD-Left Party coalition running the Berlin state executive.

TV-N introduced a new low-wage sector, with union-agreed wages for newly hired drivers far below the real wages of existing employees and longer working hours.

Since then, working conditions and wages have deteriorated further. But this is not nearly enough for Verdi and the Senate. They want to keep competitors out of the lucrative public transit market. Thus, Arndt declared at a press conference two years ago: “We want both companies [BVG and Berlin Transport] to become competitive again as employers.”

The pandemic is not regarded as a threat to the employees but as an obstacle to achieving this goal. The current SPD-Left Party-Green Party Senate had to come up with compensation for BVG’s pandemic-related losses for last year with a subsidy of €144 million. For 2021, BVG again expects a deficit of more than €140 million. This will lead, as one bus driver told the WSWS anonymously, to Verdi and BVG “demanding even more from us.”

Verdi is not interested in the welfare of public transit workers or achieving real protection against infection based on the highest scientific developments, either in Berlin or elsewhere. All the extremely limited measures—such as the temporary and totally inadequate plastic sheeting to protect the passenger compartment, social distancing and the requirement to wear masks in canteens and breakrooms—were introduced solely because of the increasing unrest in the workforce and the rising infection figures.

The General Staff Council (GPR) is actively involved in covering up the risk of infection within the workforce. While the BVG, as the WSWS learned from a source, informs the GPR monthly about the level of new infections, these figures are concealed from the staff.

The more than 5,000 bus drivers and around 10,000 other BVG workers are deeply concerned and angry, and not just because of front boarding and on-bus ticketing.

Bus driver Alex B. told the WSWS about the latest postponement of front boarding: “Verdi wants to play for time. They only claim that they are there for us drivers. But the whole thing is a farce. Now Verdi and the management together want to carry out an investigation without us bus drivers. We are not being consulted.” Under these

conditions, no better protection for the drivers could come about, he said. “They only think of themselves, of their own interests when it comes to salaries,” Alex B. stated. “It all comes down to profit.”

Fellow workers and friends from all sectors, family members and acquaintances were being increasingly affected by coronavirus, not a few with more severe to very severe illnesses. Children in schools and day-care centres were also at high risk, he added.

“We need a total lockdown to contain the pandemic,” Alex B. demanded, given the nearly 83,000 deaths in Germany and over 24,000 new infections within 24 hours.

The murderous herd immunity policy, as a “response” to the coronavirus enforced by all the establishment parties in defence of the profit interests of the ruling class against the population, had drastically exacerbated social inequality in addition to the consequences for health and life, he said.

“The gap between rich and poor is widening.” With a good monthly wage of “2,000 euros” one could “no longer live reasonably” in Berlin because of the acute housing shortage and high rents, Alex B. said. “That’s another reason why I support the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP) and the Transport Workers Action Committee for Safe Jobs.”

Bus drivers in Berlin are fighting back, like their colleagues in Manchester, London, New York, Rome, Sao Paulo and the 130,000 bus drivers in India who have been in struggle for three weeks against the inhuman living conditions caused by the capitalist government.

The trade unions have both feet on the side of the ruling class. In its call for the May Day online rally, the International Committee of the Fourth International wrote: “There has not been a single struggle waged by the unions against the ruling class policy of ‘herd immunity’ and massive handouts to the rich. For the working class to fight back, a path must be created to coordinate its struggles in different factories, industries and countries in opposition to the ruling class and the corporatist unions.”

Alex agreed with this assessment: “I support the May Day call for the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. The more bus drivers and other workers unite, the harder it will be for BVG [and the other employers] to decide against us.”



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