

Berlin bus drivers demand no front boarding without drivers' consent!

Statement by the Action Committee of Transport Workers for Safe Workplaces
13 May 2021

The decision of the Berliner Verkehrsbetriebe (BVG) management to postpone the reintroduction of front boarding planned for the beginning of May is an important success in the interest of all BVG workers. Now it is necessary to continue the mobilisation that has begun and to discuss with as many bus drivers as possible the need to prevent front boarding from taking place in the future without the drivers' agreement.

Management, hand in hand with the staff council and the Verdi trade union, will no doubt attempt to set a new date to begin front boarding within a short time. To this end, measurement of aerosol levels is now to be carried out directly in the driver's cabin.

For Eva Kreienkamp, chairwoman of the board, the result of this risk assessment is just a foregone conclusion. "We assume that the last worries about a possible risk of contagion can thus be dispelled," she announced after the meeting of the BVG supervisory board at the end of April.

There are two reasons why Kreienkamp is confident that with this "supplementary expert opinion" she will be able to push through front boarding against the resistance of drivers.

First, this measurement is to be carried out by the very same institutions that already prepared the original expert opinion that justified front boarding for the beginning of May: the Technical University (TU) and the Charité hospital.

Second, the staff council and Verdi support BVG management in this approach. In a statement by the Verdi works group executive, the union announced it had agreed, "on the fringes of the supervisory board meeting," with the BVG executive board on "a way out of the deadlock over front boarding." It considers measuring aerosol levels directly at the driver's cabin to be suitable for making a final decision.

A fortnight ago, BVG spokesperson Petra Nelken, referring to the TU-Charité study, had told the *taz* newspaper: "We can say with a clear conscience that we have done everything to make the workplaces safe." BVG had spent "two million euros and rebuilt all the cabins," Nelken emphasised.

We bus drivers know better.

In truth, these conversions, which, depending on the type of vehicle, create neither a truly enclosed cabin area nor hermetically seal it off, were not a reaction to the risk of infection with the coronavirus. They were planned long before 2020 to protect driving personnel from being assaulted by passengers.

BVG's chief company doctor and pandemic officer, Dr Manuela Huetten, also announced: "It was a particular concern of ours that the effectiveness of the screens in the buses was also scientifically tested with reference to coronavirus." She claimed that the installed screens "in combination with the driver's compartment ventilation" offered "the highest level of safety at work from an occupational health point of view" (Dr Huetten in the second issue of the BVG magazine *PROFIL*).

This is simply untrue.

As reported at the protest rally before the supervisory board meeting, even Professor Ulrich Kertzsch, head of the Charité study, confirmed that the scientists commissioned with the study had only "evaluated a small part of the driver's workplace" and that a full investigation had therefore not taken place.

The renewed measurement of the aerosol levels, which is now supposed to be carried out directly in the driver's cabin, must be judged for what it is: a renewed manoeuvre to enforce front boarding despite the continuing risk of infection.

Therefore, we demand: No front boarding and no

ticket sales until the pandemic is officially declared over.

The only ones who should decide on this are we drivers. Our lives and health are at stake. The welfare of our families stands higher than the profit interests of the BVG board and the Social Democratic-Left Party-Green Berlin Senate (state executive).

We demand information on whether the staff council has already signed or made a company agreement or other arrangements with the board regarding front boarding and ticket sales. The staff council has no mandate to make decisions that affect our lives and health.

We demand an extraordinary online staff meeting, where all drivers have the opportunity to report on their experiences and on the daily risk of infection and to discuss measures to improve safety at work.

We reject the complicity of Verdi officials and staff councillors, who sit on the supervisory board where they rubber-stamp all decisions against the workforce. Verdi and the Senate parties—SPD, Left Party and Greens—are closely linked and form a united front. They enforce the same inhuman policy of “profits before lives” that has led to 85,000 COVID-19 deaths nationwide. More than 3,300 people in Berlin have been sacrificed to the virus, and many thousands more are affected by the long-term consequences of the pandemic.

This includes our colleague from the Cicero-Strasse bus depot, tram driver Sven B. COVID infections are also increasing among the employees of the Sasse company, who clean our vehicles. We have indications that not two but five BVG employees have died of coronavirus.

We demand information about the real number of deaths and infections. Company doctor Manuela Huetten, who officially calls herself the BVG pandemic officer, and the safety officers on the staff council are obliged to disclose the full extent of the infections and pandemic victims. The secrecy and conspiracy towards the workers must end.

We seek to work with our colleagues in London, Paris, across Europe and around the world who are facing the same problems everywhere. The virus knows no borders, so the fight against it requires an international strategy of common resistance.

We, therefore, welcome the establishment of the

International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to share experiences and coordinate our struggle worldwide.

We repeat our demands from our statement a fortnight ago:

- 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.



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