Berlin Transit Companies restrict bus services as schools return in German capital

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The management of the Berliner Verkehrsbetriebe (Berlin Transit Companies, BVG) announced that it was restricting its scheduled bus services by 3 percent from August 22 due to staff shortages. This affects 32 of the 160 bus routes it operates in the German capital.

Local public transport buses are operating "at a somewhat reduced frequency," as the BVG put it, precisely as the new school year begins, when hundreds of thousands of children, young people and adults return to school and work from their summer holidays.

In other words, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, with thousands of infected people, an extremely high number of unreported cases and the spread of monkeypox—Berlin is a nationwide hotspot—millions of passengers will be on overcrowded buses every day.

The company explained the staff shortage by a very high level of sick leave among drivers. "The current pandemic development does not spare the transit companies," the BVG press office explained two weeks ago, adding that "in combination with a tense labour market situation," the bus operations "must be slightly adjusted after the holidays."

The BVG is not the only company affected by this. The Deutsche Bahn (DB) Regio Nordost (the German rail company for the northeast region), for example, is already operating with a limited timetable of around 97 percent of its usual services, "in order to ensure stable train traffic in the region," according to the Verkehrsverbund Berlin-Brandenburg (Transit Association of Berlin-Brandenburg, VBB), which is 100 percent publicly owned. Here, too, increased COVID-related absences are considered to be the reason. "Unfortunately, the current acute issue—COVID-related sick leave—cannot be solved with trivial measures," said the VBB.

It is unclear how many reported absences are specifically attributable to infections with coronavirus because "there is currently no obligation to report a coronavirus infection to the employer," according to BVG press spokesman Jannes Schwentu in response to a request from the WSWS. But "due to voluntary reports and the general pandemic situation, we are ... very sure that COVID makes up a decisive share of the absences."

In other major cities in Germany and Europe, too, transport companies, manufacturing and distribution businesses, along with health and education institutions, are experiencing massive staff shortages. Among others, this is the case in Cologne, Bottrop, Vienna, Salzburg, Munich, Leverkusen, Wuppertal, Hamburg and Kassel.

Recently, official COVID infection figures, together with increases in colds, such as the summer flu, increased so much that telephone consultations with a doctor are again deemed sufficient to obtain a medical absence from work. This underscores the dangerous development of the pandemic.

While coronavirus infections and re-infections, as well as an as yet unknown number of unreported cases of Long-COVID, account for a considerable proportion of the reported absences at Berlin's transport companies, there is no public discussion of an equally important reason for the labour shortage. The chronically catastrophic working conditions of the approximately 7,500 drivers are forcing many to leave the profession.

The workers are worn out due to miserable working hours in alternating shifts of up to 9 hours and 20 minutes and a six-day workweek. They also face inadequate turnaround times and huge pressure to accept greater workloads, especially from 7 p.m. onwards. The buses themselves are badly maintained and poorly cleaned and were not properly disinfected even during the worst stages of the pandemic.

Added to this are the often broken air-conditioning systems, which continued throughout the recent heat wave with record temperatures of almost 40 degrees Celsius. The temperatures for the drivers exceed the outside temperature in some cases, because adequate cooling is not possible in spite of the windows being open, and the doors being open at bus stops.

Dozens of young and newly trained bus drivers have resigned. This is not a new phenomenon at the BVG. Due to high turnover, the management and trade union were forced to increase wages by up to 17 percent three years ago in order to become a more attractive employer on the labour market and to retain existing staff. In fact, this wage increase has not compensated in the least for the wage losses of recent years.

The poor working conditions and the miserable pay are primarily due to Verdi, the BVG's in-house trade union.

In 2005, Verdi strongly supported the then Berlin state

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government of the SPD and the Left Party in reducing wages by 16 percent. Many additional benefits have been cancelled and the pace of work has been drastically intensified. For example, whereas a bus driver previously drove up to 50 kilometres in a shift, work performance rules have now increased to up to 150 kilometres per shift. In addition, a whole generation of newly hired bus drivers now receives 30 percent less pay than their older colleagues.

The economic policy background for this radical deterioration in working conditions and wages was the privatisation of local and long-distance public transport in all member states of the European Union. Only the transport company with the lowest personnel costs receives a share of the market for a few years.

Instead of calling on transport workers across the EU to fight together against the fragmentation and destruction of local and long-distance public transport, trade unions and companies insisted that, in addition to the tendering procedure, direct procurement should also be possible, but only if it is "market-oriented." This gave domestic companies an advantage over foreign competitors when awarding contracts.

But this advantage was paid for by the reduction of tens of thousands of jobs, the dismantling of formerly existing wage systems and the introduction of low wages, as well as a deterioration in working conditions. Passenger transport on "non-profitable routes" has been reduced or stopped altogether.

To impose the spiral of falling wages and harder working conditions on the workforce, Verdi and its apparatus of shop stewards and works councils continue to rely on the tried-and-tested strategy of splitting colleagues by means of different wage rates, working hours and shift systems.

Verdi's hostility towards bus drivers became particularly evident with the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020. "Infection, including with COVID-19, is part of everyday life" and the "general risk of life," according to the union, whose position was shared by the German Trade Union Confederation. The main slogan was that the buses roll, no matter what it costs! Only bitter resistance from the drivers forced the union and management to temporarily close the front door on the buses and take minor protective measures.

Many studies now show how great the risk of infection is in public transport, where hundreds of thousands of people gather every day in confined spaces. But all protective measures, except a mask mandate in public transport, were abolished by the Berlin state government. Compliance with the mask mandate is never controlled in practice. BVG management does not support drivers when they have to deal with anti-mask COVID deniers.

It is thanks to the sense of responsibility of the working population, which represents the vast majority of passengers, that the mask mandate has been generally observed so far.

The government's policy of mass infection, which will take its devastating toll in the face of the highly contagious BA5 virus with the next autumn wave, must be combatted in the same way as the poor working conditions and wages. The current inflation and the upcoming price explosions as a result of the war and the German government's sanctions policy will further massively reduce the value of wages.

But such a struggle is only possible in opposition to the trade unions. Transport companies increasingly operate globally, so transport workers must also organise themselves globally. The trade unions, on the other hand, advocate a nationalist perspective. They deliberately try to isolate the struggles in one country or region from each other. They are not on the side of the workers, but on the side of big business and the state.

The BVG workers are not alone: they have millions of allies—bus drivers in all cities, train drivers at DB and private operators, ground and on-board personnel at airports, employees of the public service, the delivery services, Amazon and industrial companies, as well as nurses and educators. All of these workers face the same problems and enemies.

Workers must establish independent rank-and-file committees and link up with colleagues in Britain, Poland, France, the Netherlands, Austria, the whole of Europe and worldwide.

For this reason, transport workers should support the campaign by American autoworker Will Lehman in the fight for the presidency of the United Auto Workers (UAW). He is standing not to reform the trade union apparatus, but to abolish it and to mobilize autoworkers politically through a network of rank-and-file committees—not only in the USA, but worldwide.

This work is also pursued by the Action Committee of Transport Workers here in Berlin, which is a member of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

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