Nearly two dozen New York City transit workers test positive for COVID-19

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The Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) announced Thursday that twenty-three New York City transit workers have tested positive for COVID-19. The announcement came a day after a New York City bus driver who subsequently tested positive fainted at a Brooklyn bus depot. The MTA's callous response—telling workers present, even those who had recently interacted with the infected driver, to continue with their planned schedule—sparked immense anger.

Frankie, an MTA bus driver present at the incident Wednesday, described the scene to the *World Socialist Web Site*, "A female worker fainted in the depot room, then they sent us to work. It's where we report to work at Jackie Gleason depot. They only closed the room and then sent us elsewhere. Workers that interacted with her are still working. We are all wondering what is going on."

The rapid spread of the coronavirus among transit workers is the direct result of the criminal indifference and malign neglect of the government, the MTA and Transport Workers Union (TWU) bureaucrats who supposedly represent the workers.

In New York City, as elsewhere around the United States, access to coronavirus tests is being rationed, facilitating an explosion of cases. Transit workers have no access to personal protective equipment unless they procure it themselves and they have received no systematic training on how to protect themselves. The MTA refuses to enact meaningful operational safeguards to limit the transmission of the virus. The minimal efforts that have been announced, such as the sanitizing of stations and equipment, are seen by workers as nothing more than public relations campaigns.

The experience of transit workers in New York is being replicated all around the world with government's focused on limiting the impact of the crisis on corporate profits, even if that means immediate danger for workers. This week, autoworkers throughout North America took matters into their own hands, launching a wave of wildcat actions to force the shutdown of their factories over coronavirus concerns.

Despite New York City's rapidly expanding outbreak—now the nation's largest—the subway and bus networks remain fully operational. While ridership has plummeted since the outbreak began, the system, which under normal circumstances provides daily transportation to eight million passengers, remains the only feasible way for workers in health care and other critical industries to get to work, and the only way for broad sections of the public to access food, medical care and other vital services.

Transit workers are providing essential services, yet their health and ability to continue to give this service are being put at huge risk. Concerns and confusion are soaring as an increasing number of MTA employees test positive for the virus. "I don't feel safe at all because of what is going on. There is no information. I am in panic mode," Frankie said. "I have a wife and four kids. I don't know what would happen if I got the virus."

Paid sick leave is only being given to those who have tested positive or who are able to convince the MTA's notoriously unsympathetic sick desk they have been exposed to someone who has tested positive. A reporting system designed to restrict testing requires workers to spell out the exact nature of the exposure. Workers for instance must detail whether the positive individual touched them or coughed on them directly.

Those who do feel ill and do not want to risk exposing co-workers and riders to the virus are forced to use their accrued sick days. Many workers have already exceeded the 12-days of paid-sick leave allowed annually. They are under pressure from both the MTA and the TWU, which under the terms of the new contract has a financial incentive to increase employee availability by reducing workers' time off.

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In practice, this means many workers who are potentially carrying the virus are forced to remain on the job. On March 17, a worker who believed he had been exposed to someone who tested positive was interviewed on *Progressive Action TV*, an online show run by an opposition faction of the TWU. The worker stated, "They don't have me self-quarantining. I am not on official administrative leave. I and my co-workers are obligated to work."

The policy of "work first, test later" continues to threaten the lives of workers, their families, and the riding public. This policy will only lead to the infection and death of more workers and riders in the long run.

Another major concern is the lack of safety equipment, including masks and gloves. At the onset of the outbreak in New York the MTA actively prevented workers from wearing their own masks.

Jey, a subway station agent, told the WSWS, "They were pulling employees out of service at first for wearing mask. They said we can wear them now but they're not providing masks. The supplies are very limited." This rule was only changed on March 9 when there were already 142 confirmed cases in New York State, and likely thousands of unconfirmed cases, in response to an uproar by transit workers trying to protect themselves.

Transit workers have received no training on how to deal with sick passengers and aren't provided with adequate cleaning supplies to sanitize frequently touched work surfaces.

Wider social conditions in New York City are also being compounded by the current crisis. The MTA often acts as a safe haven for the over 70,000 homeless individuals in the city. With no option many are forced to turn to the subway system for shelter. The homeless population is extremely vulnerable due to the poor sanitary conditions of their existence and the prevalence of pre-existing illnesses. This then poses a greater risk of contagion for subway workers and riders.

Josephine, a train conductor, commented on this issue. "We work around homeless people that have no way of cleaning themselves or their hands at all. So how are we being protected? Nothing has been done for us," she said. "We are all worried, hoping we will make it another day."

With the crisis intensifying each day, there is mounting anger among workers at officials' reckless response to the pandemic.

Jey described the precariousness of her own situation. "I'm a single parent with a child who has asthma," she said. "I'm really scared to go home every night in case I give him the virus from work." Another MTA worker, Raya, commented on Twitter, "Wondering when the health and safety of me and my fellow MTA coworkers are going to be taken into consideration... I most certainly don't feel safe at all and I'm sure plenty others feel the same."

The TWU is not an ally but an obstacle to workers' fight to protect their health. The union has functioned to provide cover for the criminal response of the MTA and the government, refusing to take any action beyond placing the most minimal demands on the transit agency: Tests for those who are "presumptively positive," establishing a toll-free number for transit workers to call with health issues, and suggestions for distancing bus operators from passengers.

These demands do not even begin to address the threats to workers' lives. All transit workers must have access to testing immediately as part of a nation-wide ramp up of testing capacity in order to stop the spread of the disease. Those who are ill or at high risk must be granted unlimited leave until they are recovered, receiving full pay and free treatment.

Decisions about health precautions and operational safeguards must be based above all on public and worker health, determined by workers in collaboration with health experts. Adequate protective supplies must be procured through emergency production. Emergency housing must be provided for the homeless, so they are not forced to take shelter in subways and stations, spreading the virus further.

To carry forward the struggle for such demands, new rank-and-file organizations are urgently needed. The health and safety of the working class must come first. Decisions about operations and protective measures must be taken out of the hands of the Wall Street functionaries who direct the MTA and placed in the hands of the working class.

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