

COVID-19 outbreak in New York prisons threatens lives of thousands

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The New York Board of Correction (BoC) announced Saturday that 38 people tested positive for COVID-19 last week in New York City's prison system. As of Sunday the state has topped 15,000 confirmed cases of the coronavirus.

The announcement in New York was followed by other confirmations of outbreaks across the US prison system, including in California, Arizona and Georgia. Due to lack of testing, and the cramped unsanitary conditions of US prisons, it is likely the number of positive cases is much higher.

It was reported Sunday evening that Harvey Weinstein, the recently convicted ex-media mogul, had tested positive for the virus shortly after leaving New York's infamous Rikers Island Prison Complex, where all of the cases in the state system have been confirmed.

Weinstein, 68, was put into isolation at Wende Correctional Facility in Western New York on Sunday after testing positive for COVID-19. Weinstein was incarcerated on Rikers Island until March 18 and given the scale of the outbreak at the prison it is most likely that is where he contracted the disease. Given his age and poor health it is likely that Weinstein's 23-year conviction, the product of an unconstitutional show trial built on the anti-democratic hysteria of the right-wing #MeToo, will turn into a death sentence.

The overcrowding of prisons and lack of sanitation internationally means that prison populations are especially vulnerable to the spread of COVID-19. This has led to widespread anger among prisoners and their families, which has been expressed through a spate of prison riots, including in Italy, Brazil and most recently on Sunday in Colombia, where 23 people died. Concerns have also been raised over the threat posed to WikiLeaks founder and journalist Julian Assange, who is being held in the high-security Belmarsh prison as he

awaits a decision on extradition to the United States, and suffers from a variety of health conditions due to 10 years of confinement.

New York state has the second largest prison system in the US. According to the BoC's announcement, the Rikers Island Jail Complex, the state's largest prison, is the center of the outbreak, with 21 inmates and 17 prison staff testing positive. The first confirmed case of COVID-19 at Rikers came on March 19. On Thursday, Ross Macdonald, the chief physician at Rikers, tweeted, "we cannot change the fundamental nature of jail. We cannot socially distance dozens of elderly men living in a dorm, sharing a bathroom. ... a storm is coming." He went on to call on state authorities to "let out as many as you possibly can."

Homer Venters, former chief medical officer at Rikers, described the lack of basic sanitation at the complex: "There are lots of people using a small number of bathrooms. Many of the sinks are broken or not in use. You may have access to water, but nothing to wipe your hands off with, or no access to soap." Such conditions are typical of the American prison system.

New York state has 52 prisons hosting 19,920 prisoners. The majority of the 10,000 inmates at the Rikers facility are non-convicted pre-trial detainees, i.e., legally innocent. On March 9, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo unveiled New York's own hand sanitizer which is being produced at Rikers, where inmate laborers typically make less than \$1 an hour. When production started, hand sanitizer was still considered contraband in New York correction facilities, therefore the prisoners were unable to use it to protect themselves as they worked.

The American incarceration system is notorious for its extent and brutality. The US has 4.4 percent of the

world's population but houses 22 percent of the world's prisoners. In 1972, there were 300,000 people incarcerated in the US, by 2016 this number had risen to 2.3 million. According to California Prison Focus, "no other society in human history has imprisoned so many of its own citizens." The vast majority of those imprisoned are working class and disproportionately from minority groups within the United States.

This is a product of what is often called the "Prison-Industrial Complex" where federal, state and private prisons contract out prison labor to corporations. Corporations such as Boeing, IBM, Microsoft and AT&T all use prison labor to maximize profits. Wages in federal prisons are typically \$1 per hour, but in private prisons inmates often make as little as \$0.16 per hour.

The political influence of the prison industry was exposed in January of this year as the passage of a very limited bail reform bill, which would have led to the release of non-violent pre-trial detainees, came under bipartisan attack in the New York Senate.

Despite declining rates of crime, the increasing use of prison labor correlates to an increasing rate of incarceration in the past 40 years. The enactment of minimum sentencing laws, bail bonds and draconian "three strikes" laws were attacks on the working class that have led to a higher proportion of cases ending with imprisonment and longer periods of incarceration. The bipartisan politics of "law and order" have been a crucial part of the 40 years of social counterrevolution against the social and legal rights of the working class.

In a conference on Sunday night, President Trump said that he would consider releasing all medically vulnerable non-violent federal prisoners in response to the outbreak. Some states have begun to release limited numbers of prisoners. On March 20, New York released 40 inmates following the first positive test at Rikers the day before. These limited measures are cynical efforts to appease popular anger at the treatment of prisoners during the pandemic. Conditions in the US prison system and the infectiousness of the virus mean it is most likely already too late for the majority of the prison population, guards and staff to avoid infection.

On Sunday, New York Mayor Bill De Blasio announced that the city will have critical medical shortages within 10 days. New York's inhumane treatment of prison and jail inmates means that a

disproportionately high percentage of this vulnerable population will die from the virus. Many of these individuals will pay the ultimate price for minor drug offences, petty crimes and the inability to reach bail.



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