

New York Democratic governor finally suspends construction projects after criminal delay

Elliott Murtagh, Sandy English
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The Democratic governor of New York state, Andrew Cuomo, finally banned “non-essential” construction projects on Friday, amid growing anger from the state’s construction workers and concerns from public health experts. Some sites, including those building affordable housing, hospitals or critical infrastructure, will remain open.

Until yesterday, construction workers across New York City and state were still required to show up to work on almost any project, victims of Cuomo’s categorization of construction—including luxury apartment high-rises—as “essential businesses.”

But as the number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 in New York state soared this week—by Friday there were 44,635 cases in the state and 25,398 in the city, with hundreds dead and a dangerous shortage of equipment and hospital beds—construction workers and their families voiced increasing opposition to the proposals from both Cuomo and Democratic New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio that workers remain on the job. Social distancing is notoriously difficult on construction sites, and running water and sanitation facilities are often scarce.

Both Cuomo and de Blasio, with the backing of big realtors, construction firms and local trade unions, permitted construction to continue, even on job sites with confirmed cases of workers testing positive for coronavirus, leading to increasing concern and opposition from the more than 150,000 construction workers in the city.

On Monday, carpenters working at the Hard Rock Hotel in Manhattan walked off the job after hearing about a co-worker testing positive for COVID-19. After two days of disinfecting, and without any additional

protective equipment for the workers, the job site opened back up. Another worker tested positive for the virus this week at a construction site on Broadway in the site of Facebook’s new corporate offices, but the job was not shut down.

A twitter hashtag, #StopConstruction, became increasingly popular among New York construction workers and their families, who often posted photos of unsafe and unsanitary working conditions as the coronavirus continued to spread.

Ivan, a concrete mixing truck driver in New York City who spoke to the WSWs this week, said: “Everybody’s scared. They need to shut down construction sites to stop the spread. The danger is growing fast.” Ivan said that there hasn’t been COVID-19 testing for workers, and access to dust masks has been restricted while requests for hand sanitizer have gone ignored. Recently, three of his coworkers have been rumored to have come down with the coronavirus, but management has kept workers in the dark.

An electrician currently working on a building in the financial district, recently interviewed by Gothamist, said: “I currently do not feel safe at my job site. There is no way to practice the CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] guidelines. Social distancing [and] proper sanitation are next to impossible while working construction. Especially doing indoor work, which a lot of high rise projects are. We already work in one of the most dangerous fields in the city and this just compounds it.”

A construction worker at a downtown luxury condo high-rise told The City news site that he rides a packed elevator up 50 floors to get to his job site and that the

only hand-washing facility is on the ground floor. “Just riding the elevator to where you need to work is like an affront to the whole idea of social distancing,” he said. It is worth noting that construction workers facing these conditions also share public transit with medical workers.

Cuomo and de Blasio have delayed shutting the construction sites for weeks, much as they delayed shutting public schools. The big realtors and construction companies have applied enormous pressure to these Democratic Party politicians, to whose campaign coffers they donate lavishly.

Earlier this month, the President and CEO of the New York Building Congress, Carlo Scissura, said in an interview with Bisnow: “The safety of all workers is critical, but I think that we have to be very careful to shut down. A lot of that construction is for people who are going to need services and support in the months to come as things start reopening.”

Speaking of a shutdown of construction projects in Boston, Stephen Sandherr, the CEO of Associated General Contractors of America, claimed that most construction workers already wear gloves and masks on job sites. “Given the precautions already in place, halting construction will do little to protect the health and safety of construction workers.”

In an even more callous remark Gary LaBarbera, the president of the Building and Construction Trades Council of Greater New York, issued a press release on Tuesday praising Cuomo’s actions to keep the construction industry open. LaBarbera expressed confidence that workers would “overcome even the most difficult of circumstances.”

In a cynical display of American nationalism, LaBarbera tried to make use of the 9/11 terrorist attacks to excuse the possible exposure of construction workers to COVID-19. “Nearly 10,000 of our members put everything on the line in the months following September 11, 2001—many of our members sacrificed their own well-being, knowing very well that they could face lasting consequences for it.”

Governor Cuomo’s change of heart on the closing of construction sites is a tactical move on his part to appease public anger. Meanwhile the Democrats are collaborating with the Trump administration’s “get back-to-work” campaign, which accepts a higher death toll among workers and their families from COVID-19

for the sake of corporate profits.

As of Friday, LaBarbera had made no comment on Cuomo’s new order. His reactionary bluster, in any case, fooled no one. “I’m essential to the pocketbooks of rich contractors and essential for spreading the virus, but that’s about it,” said a New York electrician who spoke to the *New York Times* this week. “It’s not essential for us to be here right now.”

There is another side to the issue of the construction sites. Many city construction workers are low-paid and undocumented. These workers are in danger not only of contracting the disease at a work site but of spreading it because of the often-crowded, dormitory-style conditions in which they live, particularly in New York’s outer boroughs.

The cessation to work order will be a disaster for these workers, who don’t qualify for government assistance, and live paycheck to paycheck. Mario Ortega, a 31-year-old day laborer who lives in a one-bedroom apartment in Queens with his wife and two children, told Gothamist before the shutdown order, “Of course I am concerned about the virus, but right now it’s about the economic need that I have. How would I be able to afford to pay the rent, food, to be able to eat?”

Keeping the sites closed and fighting for adequate compensation for all workers, regardless of legal status, is a demand that must unite all construction workers, including immigrants and the undocumented. The Socialist Equality Party has called for broad testing for workers who may already be infected, full compensation for those unemployed because of the crisis, regardless of immigration status, and safe working conditions for those in essential services. Construction workers should attend the WSWs online meeting on Sunday, “The COVID-19 pandemic: Capitalism and the making of a social and economic catastrophe,” to discuss these policies—the most pressing and urgent tasks of the moment.



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