

Coronavirus death toll extends to New York transit workers

Daniel de Vries
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Two New York City transit workers died Thursday of COVID-19, the first fatalities among the transit agency's 70,000 employees. The deceased were identified as Peter Petrassi, a 49-year-old train conductor working out of an operations office in Queens, and Oliver Cyrus, a 61-year-old bus operator who worked out of the Manhattanville Depot in Manhattan.

A third worker, a 36-year-old train operator, died early Friday morning in a subway fire which officials are investigating as suspected arson. Several others were injured in the incident.

The deaths marked a devastating end to the work week, bringing home to transit workers the deadly consequences of the criminally indifferent response to the coronavirus crisis at all levels, from the federal, state and city governments to the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) and their accomplices in the Transport Workers Union (TWU).

"To lose two coworkers in one day and to have others testing positive, and with the cases mounting up, again I ask us: What will it take to be protected by the entity that we work for, and the Union that claims to represent us," D. Lamb-El, a Brooklyn transit worker posted on Facebook. "Death has entered."

Petrassi and Cyrus were just two of at least 52 transit workers in New York City with confirmed cases as of this past Tuesday, the last time a tally was made public by MTA officials. Even at the time, that figure was a gross underrepresentation of the real number of illnesses.

On Friday the official count in New York City alone eclipsed 25,000. Every day, every hour on the job increases the risk of spreading the virus throughout the transit workforce. While ridership plummeted since the stay-at-home order came into effect last Sunday,

hundreds of thousands of passengers nonetheless continue to commute on public transit daily.

Transit workers are still being packed into crowded crew rooms, being sent out on routes without adequate protective equipment, and assigned tasks where social distancing is impossible.

"We are not getting protection. The only thing we have that the MTA gave out is gloves," William, a worker in the Rapid Transit Operations division, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "But yet, we do our jobs. Do they care? No. We are just a number. But they want us to work overtime now."

Anthony, who works as a plumber for the infrastructure section of the MTA, described the reckless conditions that continue to exist for workers at his West 4th Street location. "I work in a locker room with 30 guys from 6 AM to 2 PM, and we share it with another 30 guys that work from 7 AM to 3 PM. For an hour every morning we overlap and end up being in a cesspool situation, with over 50 guys sometimes, in a room probably 50 feet by 30 feet."

Anthony explained that on March 22 one of his supervisors tested positive for COVID-19. Despite this many workers at the location were deemed ineligible to receive paid quarantine leave. "So they were forced to choose their financial responsibilities over their life out of fear that the system that they sweat and bleed for will not have their backs."

Another rail worker told the *WSWS* that crews only learned of a positive case at the Delancey Street facility after a sympathetic supervisor leaked a memo. Workers remained on the job uninformed while a cleaning crew was ordered to sanitize the facility.

The MTA, in collaboration with the TWU, has insisted upon maintaining policies that result in the further spread of the pandemic. Without a doctor's note

workers are allowed just five days of leave, despite the city health department urging residents not to visit a doctor or seek testing unless hospitalization is required. Workers on 14-day quarantine due to confirmed exposure have been called back early to staff subways and buses. A full slate of regular maintenance was scheduled last weekend as if the pandemic was raging on another planet.

The risk to transit workers is heightened by chronic exposure to hazardous environments. Diesel exhaust is a known carcinogen and exacerbates asthma, a condition prevalent among transit workers. Workers with respiratory ailments are still required to come in or use their limited sick pay under conditions where the outbreak is expected to last months or more, despite the elevated risk of death if they acquire the coronavirus.

The union has functioned largely to pressure workers to remain on the job. For weeks the bureaucrats in the TWU accepted the delays and outright refusals of the agency to put in place even the most elementary protections and social distancing measures. In the face of a brewing rebellion against the deadly working conditions, the TWU's response is effectively, "shut up and do your job."

The growing number of New York City transit workers and their families becoming ill has cast into doubt the continued functioning of the nation's largest public transportation system.

Already worker shortages prompted the MTA to drastically reduce scheduled service by more than 25 percent this week. The service cuts have compounded the risk to both workers who remain on the job and passengers, as they have resulted in increasing the crowding of trains and buses. For commuters on many rush hour trains and buses, following the recommended social distancing practice of six feet between people is an impossibility.

Under these conditions, the status quo is quickly becoming untenable. Following Thursday's deaths, workers are raising calls for a mass sickout in order to force the agency to increase protective measures for workers. Many workers see shutting down the transit system, while organizing alternative service for workers performing genuinely essential functions, as the only way to defend their health.

As workers are stepping up the fight for their health, the Trump and Cuomo administrations are preparing to

reopen for business as usual in a matter of mere weeks, despite projections from health experts that the worst is still to come.

The urgent task for transit workers and other workers around the globe is to fight to create the conditions for the basic needs of the working class to come above all else, whatever the costs to the corporate and financial elite.



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