

Ten New York City transit workers die of COVID-19

Sam Dalton
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At least 10 transit workers have died from Covid-19 in New York City, the epicenter of the pandemic in the United States. The number of positive cases among Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) workers is 583, up from 333 on Monday, and over 3,300 MTA workers are currently in quarantine.

Due to limited testing, these figures are likely drastic underestimations and will continue to rise in the coming days as transit workers are forced to continue working under unsafe conditions and without proper protective equipment.

The workers who have tragically died are Warren Tucker, a bus mechanic; Ernesto Hernandez, a bus operator; Caridad Santiago, a cleaner; Victor Zapana, a supervisor; Scott Elijah, a track worker; Patrick Patoir, a car maintenance worker; Peter Petrassi, a train operator; Oliver Cyrus, a bus driver; Thomas David Biju, a supervisor; and Raul Clark, a bus operator for the Big Bus company. Another worker, train operator Garrett Goble, also passed away after evacuating riders from a train following a fire on March 27.

The grim count came as the MTA announced it would supply its workers, who have been working without protection since the outbreak of the coronavirus in New York City, with 75,000 masks. Contrary to the CDC-mandated N95 masks, workers have been provided with surgical masks, and only one per week.

Surgical masks only stop the transmission of bodily fluids, and do not filter out smaller aerosol particles, leaving workers at risk of contracting the disease and infecting coworkers, passengers and family members. Moreover, what limited protective capacity these masks have ceases after a few hours. The risk is further exacerbated by the shortage of other crucial personal protective equipment such as gloves and goggles.

Transit workers also report that their working

conditions, and particularly the lack of space in breakrooms, is making it impossible to social distance.

D Lamb El, an MTA rapid transit train operator, told the WSWS, “For weeks workers have tried to get masks but there haven’t been any. Now we get these masks that are not adequate. We need N95s.”

On Twitter, another MTA worker, Roberto, posted, “Surgical masks aren’t sufficient or suitable, WHERE ARE THE N95 RESPIRATORS, GLOVES, WIPES AND ADEQUATE DISINFECTING MATERIALS?!?!?”

The Transport Workers Union is doing nothing to oppose these conditions. Interviewed on Fox5’s GoodDay NY on Tuesday morning, TWU International President John Samuelson said, “it took some threats to get those masks.” Speaking from comfort of his own home, Samuelson objected to “the idea that we would be used as cannon fodder.”

While Samuelson echoes the lies of the city’s corporate and financial elite—that “we are all in this together”—he is among the well-compensated union executives in New York City who share the ruling class outlook that the city’s workers are expendable. When asked by the interviewer if the MTA communication director’s statement that “we have been working with the TWU local 100 on these issues since day one,” was true, Samuelson boasted, that “this statement is accurate.”

Jey, an MTA station agent, told the WSWS, “The union is really just a load of crap. Everything they do is just to save face. I have not had any contacts from union representatives. I even emailed them because we have people working triples, which isn’t allowed due to shortages, but I’ve had no response. They have only said they will look at stuff and they aren’t taking any action.”

City and transit officials were well aware of the dangers of such an outbreak. Following a SARS virus outbreak in 2003, the MTA developed a pandemic plan that was adopted in 2012. A worker supplied a copy to the *World Socialist Web Site* on Tuesday.

The plan called for a command infrastructure to be set up that included a crisis management team made up of senior management convened by a pandemic coordinator. It outlined provisions for reporting and cleaning subways and specified that a six-week supply of hand sanitizer, disposable gloves and N95 respirators must be stockpiled in preparation for a flu-like pandemic.

Nevertheless, in what can only be described as a crime, the MTA implemented none of these contingencies. One worker noted that MTA management did not even know of the existence of this plan until he notified them of it.

Instead, the MTA has made a series of ad hoc, inadequate and ill-advised responses to the pandemic. On Tuesday, for example, the MTA announced cuts to service to contain the spread of the virus.

These cuts are only a reaction to the shortage of healthy workers forcing supervisors to partially shut down their lines. Dovetailing with the increasing severity of the crisis, service will no doubt be further cut as more train operators and conductors fall ill in the coming weeks, potentially isolating essential workers such as EMTs, nurses and logistics workers from their workplaces when they are needed most. While service needs to be drastically reorganized in response to the virus, the haphazard and passive response of the MTA will only lead to more overcrowding, infection and loss of essential workers due to illness.

The MTA's failure to follow its own recommendations for a pandemic has a definite political cause: it is the result of years of attacks on the New York's mass transit resources and working conditions by Democratic and Republican politicians. The aim has been to cut costs and reassure MTA bond holders that management will do everything in its power to keep the health and safety conditions for workers at a bare minimum so that debt will be serviced.

"To not implement policy at all is to say workers are expendable," D Lamb El said. "In 2003 we had lessons and we did not learn from them. Due to the failure of

these measures we will see death numbers [of transit workers] in three figures."

The inequality of the official response to the Covid-19 crisis was brought home bitterly to transit workers when MTA Chairman Patrick Foye, despite having only mild symptoms, was able to get tested immediately. Meanwhile, many very symptomatic workers are still unable to access testing.

This two-tier treatment of the haves and the have-nots in the pandemic is also expressed in New York City's transit system as a whole. Statistics show that the most impoverished neighborhoods have seen the smallest declines in ridership. The poorest sections of working people are forced to brave the risk of infection and death on the subways every day.

The situation is intolerable. Transit workers must organize rank-and-file committees, independent of the TWU, to demand fully protective masks, goggles and gloves, along with mass testing of all transit workers and riders in the subway system. MTA workers who need to be isolated from their families to prevent spread should be allocated hotel rooms or empty properties free of charge.

No matter how crucial their service, MTA workers should not have to work in unnecessarily dangerous conditions. Instead they should organize protests and other collective actions in to demand what they need. Such committees must branch out across all essential industries and include Amazon workers, UPS drivers, and grocery workers so that necessary supplies of N95 masks and other materials can be procured for them, too.

The necessity of this task is becoming clearer day-by-day as the death-toll rises and the inaction of the union and the MTA continues. "Working class people need to have a voice and representation," D Lamb El said. "The government should pay for the healthcare and this will only happen when working people are behind it. Situations like this shouldn't be happening in the 21st century, but they want us to work to death."



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