

At least 33 New York City transit workers dead as contagion spreads on buses and trains

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As the coronavirus pandemic rages through New York City, the fatal consequences for transit workers are emerging daily. In the course of a week and a half, the death toll from COVID-19 among transit workers has risen to 33, as of this writing. At least 5,600 workers are at home ill or in quarantine and more than 1,100 have tested positive.

The situation facing transit workers is far from unique. Workers in industries across the globe designated as essential are compelled to continue working under unsafe conditions, sparking a global wave of strikes and other job actions to demand protections. In London, at least 10 transit workers have died, including eight bus workers and a worker on the London Underground.

In New York, the transit crew rooms, stations, subways and buses have become a major source of ongoing transmission, not only among workers but also for the riding public. Despite a stay-at-home order issued two weeks ago, the transit system remains open to the general public. There is no screening for symptomatic workers and riders, no restrictions on who may enter, and no distribution of face masks to riders to prevent the transmission or contraction of the deadly disease from coughs and sneezes. Reductions in service have resulted only in condensing the remaining riders onto fewer trains and buses.

Nonetheless, access to transportation remains vital to the provision of essential services, including medical care, amid the pandemic. More than half of city households do not own a personal vehicle. Soaring housing costs have pushed workers further away from their jobs to the point where the average commute time into work for New Yorkers relying on transit has risen to 53 minutes, according to a survey published last year. For low wage workers, many of whom staff the essential jobs in warehousing and distribution, as health aides, food workers and in building services, the distance between

work and home can far exceed this average.

It is not only commuting to jobs that require mobility. In many neighborhoods, access to affordable food, medical treatment and other necessities simply cannot be obtained on foot.

While public transit in New York is used by passengers across much of the income spectrum, the lack of alternatives available to the working class has emerged clearly during the pandemic. An analysis of transit use data by the *New York Times* last week showed ridership declined by around 75 percent in Manhattan, the wealthiest borough. In contrast, ridership in the Bronx, the poorest borough, declined by just 55 percent.

To make matters worse, thousands of homeless have few options but to take shelter in the city's subway system, where they are at extremely high risk of catching COVID-19 and transmitting it to others.

The response of government officials, transit agency management and the trade unions has been to attempt to maintain for as long as possible business as usual, even if that means sending workers to their deaths. Now, as anger is reaching explosive levels and a growing number of workers are demanding a shutdown of normal transit operations, New York State's Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo and the Transport Workers Union (TWU) are hypocritically lauding the heroism of transit workers. Under conditions in which for weeks state and city officials have refused to provide even the most minimal protections, transit workers know this empty rhetoric is only aimed at pressuring them to accept dangerous conditions and remain on the job.

John Samuelson, the president of the TWU, gave an interview from the safety of his home to CNBC on Monday, telling reporters that "in New York City, where there has been an extremely aggressive fightback, transit workers are well protected in terms of PPE (Personal Protective Equipment). There are some other questions of

density that we can talk about,” he said, before contrasting the supposedly safe conditions in New York City to Atlanta, Cleveland and other cities. In an earlier MSNBC interview, Samuelsen rejected any call for the shutdown of the New York transit system because it was needed to transport essential workers.

In fact, the social resources exist for a rational shutdown of normal transit operations while ensuring access to transportation for essential workers and others in need.

New York City is home to 120,000 hotel rooms and more than 50,000 Airbnb units, the vast majority of which are unoccupied now that tourism has ceased. In addition, the city has hundreds of thousands of vacant apartments and houses. Even as half of luxury condominiums built in the city over the last five years remain unsold, construction of new second and third homes for the wealthy continued until late March.

These vacant properties must be allocated in a rational manner to offer free temporary lodging to workers near their workplaces in order to reduce the spread of the virus on long public commutes and to minimize household transmission. Emergency housing must also be made available to the tens of thousands of homeless, protecting them and limiting the spread of the pandemic by providing a safe alternative to the subway system.

The reliance on public transit can be further reduced by allocating unused private vehicle fleets to provide essential workers with personal mobility. The city has 130,000 licensed taxi and ride share vehicles, plus thousands more unused rental cars and business and government fleets.

Centrally organizing the distribution of food and other necessities could further cut the need for public transit. Many working class residents are forced to break social distancing guidelines by traveling to stores because they are unable to afford or not offered service by delivery companies.

Meanwhile, in wealthy areas of Manhattan, there is an excess of labor. Last Friday Amazon, which has recently gone on a hiring binge, offered workers who fulfill online orders at an upscale Manhattan Whole Foods Market a bonus of \$25 to give up their shifts due to a glut of available labor. Virtually all Whole Foods workers must commute to their jobs, as the \$17 an hour they receive during the pandemic is light-years away from being able to cover the astronomical rents in the neighborhoods which they serve.

The social resources exist to protect transit and other workers by shutting down most general public transit

service while providing transportation service to essential workers. Where the transit system must remain active, all measures must be taken to protect the health of workers and riders, including the expansion of testing and screening to isolate positive cases, including pre-symptomatic and asymptomatic cases that would otherwise allow the pandemic to spread. Adequate supplies of protective gear must be produced and made available to every essential worker.

So long as the response to the coronavirus is left in the hands of President Trump, Governor Andrew Cuomo, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, TWU President Samuelsen and their ilk, the trail of death and economic suffering unleashed by the pandemic will only expand.

While handing trillions to Wall Street and the giant corporations, both big business parties, along with the corporate media, are ramping up demands to rush non-essential workers back to work, regardless of how many deaths this will cause.

The biggest obstacle to the rational response to the pandemic is the capitalist system and the domination of society by the financial and corporate oligarchy. But transit workers, like other workers, are in a life-and-death struggle and this is pitting them directly against capitalism and the two corporate-controlled parties that defend this outmoded system.

Nothing will be accomplished via the bought-and-paid-for trade unions, which seek to suppress any job actions and promote illusions in Governor Cuomo. That is why workers must build rank-and-file workplace committees to protect their lives and unite transit workers with all other workers. The growing movement of the working class must be guided by a socialist strategy, including the nationalization of the giant banks and corporations, without compensation to their super-wealthy shareholders, and their transformation into public enterprises under the democratic and collective control of workers.

In the face of the catastrophic pandemic, all the resources of society must be directed to prioritize the life and welfare of the working class. We urge all workers who want to carry out this fight to contact us and join the Socialist Equality Party.



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