

Despite over 100 transit worker deaths, New York Governor Cuomo and MTA push for unsafe return to work

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In a malicious effort to convince transit workers that it is safe to work, Democratic New York Governor Andrew Cuomo announced on April 25 that antibody testing would begin on employees of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) this week. This criminal measure came only one day before the grim milestone of 100 transit worker deaths was reached.

As of April 26, 101 active MTA employees have died from COVID-19. Added to this number are 34 retirees and five school bus drivers. Many more remain in serious condition in hospitals across the city. These figures are collected by a team of transit workers working independently of the MTA, which has been ignored by authorities who refuse to continually track these deaths. Well over 60 employees have died since the agency's last official tally on April 7. In an April 28 *New York Post* Op-Ed, MTA Interim President Sarah Feinburg failed to acknowledge the 100-death milestone.

As the MTA and Democratic Party politicians become increasingly desperate to cover up their role in these tragic deaths, they resort to foul attacks on New York City's homeless population, whose plight has only been exacerbated by the virus.

In a reference to homeless people taking refuge on subway cars, at his April 28 news conference Governor Cuomo stated that it "is disgusting what is happening on those subway cars." Meanwhile, Feinburg's article announced, "we are changing our Code of Conduct to make it abundantly clear that the transit system must be used by people for transport only. ... We *will* enforce these new regulations in close coordination with our NYPD partners and the MTAPD [emphasis in original]."

Whatever measures the MTA takes, they will not be to protect transit workers, who are still highly vulnerable to the virus, as they go without adequate personal protective equipment (PPE), adequate access to testing and paid sick leave. By dehumanizing the homeless and presenting them as scapegoats for their own failings, Cuomo, Feinburg and their allies are trying to distract the public from their own criminal response to the pandemic. As the WSWS has stated in its demands for transit workers, the solution to the subway and city's homelessness crisis is not the brutalization of this vulnerable population by the cops, but the requisition of the hundreds of thousands of empty housing units in New York to provide necessary shelter.

It is no accident that attempts to target the homeless come as Cuomo is preparing to reopen New York state, which remains the epicenter of the pandemic. Mass transit's central role in the economic activity of New York City means it is intertwined with any effort to reopen the state. Knowing that the resumption of business is already unpopular and will lead to tens of thousands of deaths, Cuomo and his big business sponsors are seeking to convince workers who are quarantined that it will be safe to ride the subways and buses.

In addition to the vilification of the homeless, a critical part of this charade is Cuomo's efforts to roll out antibody tests to transit workers.

The WSWS made the following assessment of antibody tests on April 28: "Presently, there is no scientifically proven basis for governments to suggest that having acquired antibodies to the SARS-CoV-2 virus guarantees immunity to reinfection, nor should it

serve as a basis for an ‘immunity passport.’”

The implication of Cuomo’s promotion of antibody tests is clear: those transit workers who have recovered from COVID-19 and have antibodies will be sent back to the front lines. This move, which flies in the face of warnings from scientists and the World Health Organization, exposes the true character of Cuomo and the wider Democratic Party’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which is identical to the Republican Party’s: if workers must die to save the profits of Wall Street, then so be it.

Perhaps nowhere else in New York has this attitude been expressed more clearly than in the response of the MTA to the pandemic. Although the MTA has received \$3.8 billion from the federal government, many workers who have been forced into quarantine have not received a paycheck. With the complicity of the bought-and-paid-for Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100, the MTA did not extend its Sick Rule Stipulation for COVID-19 which expired on April 25. This means that workers will now no longer be able to take any time off to recover or to quarantine themselves following exposure to the virus beyond their 12 annual sick days. The TWU refuses to fight for even limited provisions to fight the spread of the virus among its workforce, while the MTA continues to pay its bondholders billions.

Throughout the pandemic, the measures taken by New York state, the MTA and the TWU have been aimed at giving workers a false impression of safety. The WSWS has written at length about criminal delays in the provision of adequate PPE. Of the 101 transit workers who have died, a large number can undoubtedly be attributed to this failure.

Recent efforts by the MTA to posture as actively tackling the virus have seen the conscious introduction of numerous ineffective measures. The daily temperature screening of 3,000 workers has been promoted by the MTA as a great step forward in efforts to tackle the virus. However, this is less than 5 percent of the total workforce daily, and there is no scientific evidence to suggest this is a worthwhile measure in the fight against COVID-19, which can be transmitted by asymptomatic carriers. Even when proper COVID-19 tests were also announced in a partnership between the MTA and the private Northwell group, only 50 tests were made available a day, meaning it would take *four*

years to test the MTA’s 72,000 workers.

Under constant pressure from its bondholders, long before the pandemic the MTA was pursuing attacks on the living standards of its workers. This was underlined in the last sell-out contract in which the MTA pushed through measures to increase employee availability, for which Local 100 is directly rewarded. Under the cover of the virus and impending economic crisis, other long-planned cost-cutting measures will also be pursued, including further attacks on workers’ benefits and fare hikes for riders.

The media blackout on the number of transit worker deaths, the reckless promotion of antibody tests and efforts to scapegoat New York City’s homeless population are tactical initiatives taken by the ruling class to pave the way for a deadly premature return to work. This will result in a huge spike in the deaths of transit workers and the wider New York population. The only way that transit workers and the wider working class can fight to protect human life is by forming independent rank-and-file committees to implement measures for their health and safety and that of the public.

Those transit workers who want to build an independent political leadership to fight the pandemic should take the first step by registering today to attend the International May Day Online Rally taking place on Saturday, May 2. Speakers will report on the impact of the pandemic on every continent, and present a socialist strategy to ensure the health and well-being of the entire working class.



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