

Reopening of New York City threatens a new surge in transit worker deaths

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In just over two months, more than 130 New York City transit workers have died from COVID-19. While workers have scarcely had a chance to mourn the loss of their colleagues, friends and family, the reopening of the economy is forcing workers to confront the grim reality that this may be just the beginning of the carnage.

New York Governor Andrew Cuomo and New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio moved forward with “phase one” of their reopening plan on Monday, which allows for the expansion of construction, manufacturing, wholesale and retail activities. Phase two is expected to begin at the beginning of July, further lifting restrictions on professional services, real estate firms and other businesses.

In preparation for the reopening, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) announced the resumption on Monday of full subway service and most bus service. The MTA had been operating at greatly reduced levels since late March, when subway ridership plunged more than 90 percent. Ridership, however, has already begun to recover. Nearly half a million more passengers took subways and buses at the end of May compared to the start of the month. To staff the return of full service, the vast majority of the nearly 10,000 transit workers who were taken out of service at some point due to illness or protective quarantine have now been called back to work.

While cases and deaths have declined in New York, the pandemic is far from under control. Over the past week, nearly 9,000 new coronavirus cases have been confirmed in the state, along with over 500 deaths. Under conditions where the virus is still spreading through the population, where mass testing and contact tracing infrastructure are woefully inadequate, and where workers are still not provided with sufficient

personal protective equipment, the influx of an estimated 200,000 to 400,000 more workers returning to their workplaces this coming week sets the stage for a deadly new spike in cases.

The conditions in the transit system that led to 130 worker deaths and facilitated the spread of the coronavirus around the city have not fundamentally changed. Transit workers receive just two single-use respirator masks a week despite health guidelines that mandate they be changed out at least daily if not more often. Crew rooms, locker rooms and other facilities where workers gather during each shift remain overcrowded petri dishes. Workers report concerns about the MTA relaxing the cleaning of shared surfaces, refusing to provide workers extra time to disinfect their own workstations, and lacking accommodations for those at high risk.

The MTA, backed by the Transport Workers Union (TWU), is touting a series of half measures in an attempt to convince workers and riders that the system is safe. The MTA’s 13-point plan includes, in addition to increased service, asking businesses to stagger schedules, limited mask and hand sanitizer distribution, accelerated deployment of the new fare collection system, and pilot projects to test out sanitation and air filter technologies.

While social distancing is widely understood to be one of the most important preventative measures, management has ruled out implementing any controls. “As the governor has said a number of times now, social distance is not going to be possible on the subways,” MTA chairman Pat Foye remarked. “If someone doesn’t have a mask, go to a different car, walk down the platform. We think those places will be rare. The NYPD and the MTA police will be available as necessary, but we’re seeing a high degree of

compliance by our customers across the system."

Mayor de Blasio cynically criticized the MTA's rejection of capacity limits and refusal to block off every other seat, as recommended by the Centers for Disease Control for mass transit systems. While the mayor supports the reopening of the economy, at the same time he refuses to take any responsibility for transportation alternatives. "I really want to push back on the notion that we can solve everything all the time," the mayor said last week. "There's not always the chance to help everyone all the time in terms of their transportation needs. People are going to have to improvise, and I believe they will."

The MTA will maintain night closures of subway service, ostensibly for cleaning. However, the driving force behind the unprecedented ending of night service was to root out the homeless, who were among the few remaining passengers during the peak of the first wave of the pandemic. Rather than providing much needed housing and relief for the most vulnerable section of society, city authorities brought in police officers to harass and brutalize the homeless. With horrific conditions and overcrowding in the shelters, many end up simply moving to buses each night as subways are taken out of service.

The ruling class knows full well the measures implemented thus far will not prevent the spread of the coronavirus on the subway and bus network. The New York Stock Exchange, as it partially reopened for floor trading last month, ordered its employees to stay off public transit as a condition of returning to work. While this may be possible for a layer of highly paid professionals, for the bulk of the working class in New York City, avoiding public transit is simply not an option. More than half of the households in the city do not have access to private vehicles and have been forced by soaring housing prices to live long distances from the job core in Manhattan.

The premature return to work in New York, one of the hardest hit areas anywhere on the planet, is part of an international process. The reopening campaign is being driven by the dictates of Wall Street and finance houses internationally. The trillions of dollars they have received from central governments must be paid for. This value has to be extracted from this working class, and this means a mass return to work.

Meanwhile, the country remains gripped by explosive

demonstrations triggered by the murder of George Floyd and a wave of police violence, which shows no signs of stopping. Transit workers have responded with an outpouring of anger and opposition to police violence, and attempts by authorities to force transit workers to participate in the repression of the protesters has been met with resistance. When the police department commandeered a city bus on May 29 to transport arrested demonstrators, the driver refused to comply, walking off the bus to the cheers of hundreds of protesters. The video was viewed by over 12 million on Twitter. The MTA also attempted to use station agents to guard subway stations during the protests, a move that workers bitterly denounced.

The fight to ensure safe working conditions in trains, buses and stations must be merged with the mobilization of workers to defend democratic rights. The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party urge transit workers to form rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the Democratic Party and the union apparatus, in order to organize a fight to make the full operation of subways and buses contingent upon the safety of workers and riders, and to unite with youth and other sections of workers in a struggle against police violence and dictatorship.



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