

New York City transit workers and the COVID-19 pandemic: A timeline of criminal inaction and union betrayal

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2 September 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic that tore through New York City six months ago has left many permanent scars. Among those tragically impacted were the city's thousands of transit workers. More than 10,000 transit workers either tested positive or were quarantined due to COVID-19 exposure. At least 146 lost their lives.

While new cases at present in New York are low compared to the peak in the spring, the virus is far from under control. Hundreds of city residents continue to test positive each day. Elsewhere around the country the pandemic rages uncontrollably. As officials push school reopenings and further ease restrictions on business operations, a worsening disaster is looming. In transit, protective measures like rear door boarding on buses, are being reversed in order to resume fare collection.

On top of the danger of a second coronavirus wave in New York, transit workers are up against a brutal assault on their jobs and wages. A month ago, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) exhausted all of its emergency federal aid. Officials have described the financial outlook for transit as a death spiral, and one in which "all options are on the table," including layoffs, wage cuts, de-funding pensions and massive service cuts.

Who will pay for the budget imbalances, the capitalist class that has enriched itself during the pandemic, or the working class that has already suffered mass death and illness? Will the priority in transit be the safety of workers and riders, or repaying the wealthy bondholders?

The answer to these questions will be determined in struggle. A review of the experiences of the past six months, especially the crucial period in March that set into motion mass death among transit and other workers, is indispensable for workers to prepare. What follows is an examination of the policies carried out by government officials, the MTA and the Transport Workers Union (TWU) during five weeks from March 1 through April 4.

March 1–7

On March 2, the first confirmed case of community transmission was identified in New York. The man, a Westchester lawyer who worked in New York City, fell ill nine days earlier on February 22, indicating the virus was spreading among residents in the region for at least a week and a half, likely longer.

Official cases—that is, those confirmed by testing—in the city rose from one at the start of the week to 26 on March 7. However, the abysmal testing capacity masked the uncontrolled spread of the pandemic. Using New York City data on deaths and CDC estimates of infection fatality rate

and the typical time-lag between exposure and death, actual cases were likely closer to 20,000 at the beginning of the week, rising to around 120,000 by the weekend. [1]

The absence of testing allowed officials at all levels to justify their refusal to take any serious actions to fight the pandemic. Their overriding was to avoid harming the corporate interests they represent, in the first place, Wall Street. They feared that the carrying out of the needed emergency measures to fight COVID-19 would "scare" the financial markets.

The response of all sections of the political establishment, both Democrat and Republican, amounted to lies and malign indifference. While President Trump was outrageously claiming, "Anybody that wants a test can get a test," New York City mayor Bill de Blasio urged residents to do nothing. On March 2 he tweeted, "go on with your lives + get out on the town despite Coronavirus."

Governor Cuomo advanced the absurd claim that the impending crisis was under control. "We are fully coordinated, and we are fully mobilized, and we are fully prepared to deal with the situation as it develops," he said during a press conference.

Meanwhile, the MTA was going after transit workers trying to protect themselves, ordering those who wore self-purchased masks to remove them. "Since a mask is not part of the authorized uniform and not medically recommended at this time," Chief Safety Officer Pat Warren wrote in a statement, "they may not be worn by uniformed MTA employees."

The decision sparked an uproar by transit workers. Nonetheless, the TWU allowed the MTA to continue this outrageous policy for a week. In a series of tweets and statements, the union focused its media machine at amplifying the MTA's plans for "enhanced sanitization" of stations and equipment, advancing the line put forward by the political establishment that everything was under control.

March 8–14

The ruling class' refusal to take action to counter the spread of the virus continued this week, even as it became indisputable that the pandemic was spreading exponentially in the New York City area. A study by Columbia University researchers found that if the shutdown and other steps were taken this week, 55 percent of deaths around the country would have been avoided.

Governor Cuomo ordered the transit system, a prerequisite to the functioning of the economy, to remain open. "The answer to the rumor

that circulated yesterday that the MTA would shut down transit is no, period, full stop,” the governor’s appointed chairman of the MTA, Patrick Foye, said on March 13.

Not only would the transit system continue to function, but workers would receive no personal protective equipment (PPE). While the MTA backtracked on its policy that prevented workers from using their own masks and gloves, the agency insisted they were not needed and refused to release their stockpile to workers.

Throughout the week subway and bus ridership remained near average: 80 percent of the typical volume for subways and 90 percent for buses. At rush hour this meant that many riders scarcely had six inches of social distancing, let alone the recommended six feet.

Testing remained criminally low. Cumulative positive tests in New York City rose to nearly 2,000 by the end of the week. However, based on the number of deaths that would occur over the next few weeks, this figure likely undercounts the number of actual cases by a factor of 100.

March 15–21

Most transit workers, even those “presumed positive” due to symptoms and contact with ill individuals, were denied tests. Workers took to social media to report symptoms, alerting those who shared crowded crew rooms and bus barns of possible exposure. What little testing that was conducted revealed on March 15 the first confirmed case, a Long Island Rail Road sheet metal worker who had been ill for over a week.

Confirmed transit cases mounted throughout the week. A group of 30 workers at a subway office in Queens was ordered to quarantine on March 17 after a confirmed case. At the Fresh Pond bus depot in Queens, more than two-dozen bus operators phoned in sick, triggering the cancellation of routes. By the week’s end, there were over 20 confirmed cases among transit workers with scores more on quarantine.

As workers were falling ill throughout the system, the MTA and TWU attempted to cover up the spread of the virus and keep workers on the job without PPE. On March 18 workers at the Jackie Gleason bus depot told the WWSW of one incident where a bus driver fainted at roll call and later tested positive for the virus. Despite the exposure of dozens of workers to the virus, no one was quarantined.

Officials were well aware of the dangerous conditions in the transit system. Recognizing the extreme danger of large groups in confined spaces, governor Cuomo implemented a ban on social gatherings of more than 50 people on March 16. His executive order did not apply to transit, however, despite the capacity for over 200 people in each subway car and many more in each station.

Officials attempted to maintain transit service as usual, except for allowing rear door boarding on buses as of March 20. To carry this out, they relied on TWU officials to suppress growing opposition to unsafe conditions.

The union reacted with a campaign to downplay the risks of the virus, undermine workers’ demands for PPE and browbeat them into remaining on the job. “We must take every precaution,” TWU local 100 president Tony Utano wrote in a statement on March 19, “but we must not panic. Experts say 80% of people who contract the virus will be able to recover at home and not require hospitalization.”

In the same statement, Utano admonished transit workers to set aside their concerns about deadly conditions and keep working. “We have always risen to the occasion in past crises ... all of New York is looking to us to keep the heart and soul of New York, our transit system, running.”

While the MTA’s pandemic plan included the stockpiling of N-95 masks and other PPE, Utano defended the agency’s withholding of this

gear in an interview with NY1 the next day, saying that because of the supply shortage “it would be senseless to give them out.” The same day, TWU local 100 Rapid Transit Operations vice president Eric Loegel visited crew rooms ridiculing train operators and conductors for demanding masks.

While the TWU was working to keep transit workers on the job despite deadly conditions, workers in other industries were beginning to take the initiative. On March 18 workers at two Michigan auto assembly plants responded to cases in their factories by rebuffing the union and carrying out wildcat work stoppages that forced the shutdown of production.

Opposition to dangerous working conditions also peaked among teachers in New York City. The prospects of a mass sickout prompted officials to announce on March 15 the cancellation of in-person classes for 1.1 million children.

March 22-28

The week initiated a period of mass death for New York City transit workers. On March 26, Peter Petrassi and Oliver Cyrus died of COVID-19. Adding to the carnage, train operator Garrett Goble died in a fire on March 27 after heroically evacuating passengers from his No. 2 train.

The deaths of the transit workers took place amid a medical catastrophe throughout the city. On March 22, 50 people died of the virus in New York City. By the 28th, the death rate rose to 325 a day. Hospitals were inundated as desperate patients lined up for hours outside facilities like Elmhurst Hospital in Queens. City officials began deploying mobile morgues outside of hospitals to store the dead bodies.

The carnage had already been set into motion by policies in place throughout the month. It wasn’t until March 22, when official cases were at 24,000 and real cases likely in the vicinity of a million and a half, that governor Cuomo finally announced a “pause” and issued a stay-at-home order for non-essential workers. The order itself was lax and included many exceptions, including those constructing luxury housing.

Ridership on trains and buses dropped to 10 percent of their normal levels. With thousands of transit workers out sick, the agency was forced to greatly reduce service. This meant that the 1 million passengers that rode the subways and buses each day were crammed onto fewer vehicles, at times leading to severe overcrowding.

Despite the dangers, the MTA, with the assistance of the TWU, continued to order workers to staff trains and buses without PPE throughout the week. Not until March 28 did the MTA announce the availability of 75,000 masks—a number wholly inadequate—roughly one for each employee. The agency still refused to provide respirator masks.

Workers who were exposed or at high risk scrambled to protect themselves. The MTA hotline set up to provide human resources and occupational health services failed miserably. The line was inundated with 8,000 calls a day. Many workers waited on hold for hours without ever reaching anyone.

The communication from the union was just as infuriating. Local 100 president Utano sought to quell mounting anger. “This has been a very traumatic time for my members and I hope these masks will give them some peace of mind as they continue providing essential bus and subway service,” he remarked on March 28.

The federal government meanwhile rushed to ensure the finance houses and major corporations had all the support they needed to secure their fortunes. On March 27, the \$2 trillion CARES Act passed with overwhelming bipartisan support. While some workers received a paltry stimulus check, the bulk of the government’s assistance went to propping

up Wall Street. The MTA received emergency funding of just \$3.8 billion, a relative pittance that the agency exhausted by July.

March 29-April 4

With deaths mounting daily, the MTA and TWU went into damage control to cover up their gross negligence over the preceding month. MTA chairman Pat Foye and New York City Transit interim president Sarah Feinberg went on a media blitz, touting their changed mask policy and blaming federal guidance for their refusal to provide PPE to employees.

As the MTA and Governor Cuomo changed their position on masks, the TWU claimed they had been fighting for them all along. TWU national chief John Samuelsen surfaced on March 31 to claim, fantastically, that “it took some threats to get those masks.” He later admitted in the interview on GoodDay NY that the MTA’s assertion that “we have been working with the TWU local 100 on these issues since day one” was entirely accurate.

Throughout the week, local president Utano and other union officials held a series of photo ops handing out the much delayed and inadequate masks to transit workers, peaking when the MTA released its limited supply of respirator masks on April 4. The union also continued to promote every hypocritical utterance made by governor Cuomo, who just months prior had launched a dirty campaign to vilify transit workers ahead of contract talks as overtime cheats and common criminals. “Gov. Cuomo singled out Transit Workers as ‘doing heroic work’ in his daily press conference from Albany this morning,” TWU local 100 tweeted. “He noted that transit workers have a ‘very high rate’ of illness due to the Coronavirus, and he personally thanked TWU and the workforce for its heroic efforts.”

The week also featured growing indications that the MTA’s finances were headed toward disaster, even after the \$3.8 billion in federal funds had been secured. During his appearance on The Brian Lehrer Show on March 30, MTA chairman Pat Foye insisted that more federal help was needed. He also made clear the priorities of the agency in handling the fiscal emergency. “We expect to make every principal and interest payment. We’re not asking for forgiveness from our creditors,” Foye said.

Over subsequent weeks, the MTA enacted a series of policies, including night subway closures and removal of cash from station booths, that set the stage for job cuts if made permanent.

The lack of an accurate and timely tally of deaths led a trio of transit workers to begin compiling the names of their fallen colleagues, shared via social media. The number of dead stood at 36 on April 6. By April 11, that number shot up to 62. Before the month was out, more than 100 New York City transit workers were dead.

Lessons for the struggles ahead

The homicidal policy carried out in New York City this spring was not simply a matter of incompetent leadership. The refusal of Trump, Cuomo and de Blasio to act aggressively to save lives was above all driven by the needs of the corporate and financial elite, operating in a social and economic system that cannot function without the uninterrupted accumulation of private profit. That policy is still being carried out to this day, even after 180,000 deaths nationally and 800,000 around the world.

The Democrats no less than the Republicans prepared the coronavirus catastrophe, overseeing decades of funding cuts to health care and

infrastructure while ignoring warnings by scientists to prepare for the inevitability of a flu-like pandemic.

Far from defending the needs of workers, the TWU served to stifle at the crucial time the growing opposition among workers. The union carried out faithfully the dictates of Governor Cuomo to keep workers on the job amid deadly conditions and sought to promote illusions in the Democratic Party for a resolution to the crisis triggered by the pandemic.

It is not the two political parties of Wall Street, nor the trade unions, that transit workers must turn to. Transit workers must connect their fight to the broader rebellion by the working class that is now brewing. Currently, millions of educators around the country and internationally are engaged in a struggle against the unsafe return to schools. At the same time, masses of workers are faced with destitution as unemployment benefits are slashed, and as city and state governments, including in New York, prepare for budget massacres.

The struggle to save lives and defend jobs depends on workers organizing their own independent fighting organization, centered around demands that elevate the needs of workers above those of the capitalists. Not one more transit worker’s death. Not one more job loss.

The Socialist Equality Party calls for workers to organize rank-and-file committees to prepare a counteroffensive, uniting transit workers with other sections of workers in the US and globally in a common effort to defend lives and jobs. We urge you to contact the Socialist Equality Party today to carry forward this fight.

More information on rank-and-file committees for transit workers can be found here. For help starting a rank-and-file safety committee at your workplace, contact us at www.sws.org/contact.

[1] The authors estimated actual case counts based on a) deaths reported by New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (data available

here: <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/covid/covid-19-data-deaths.page>)

b) an infection fatality rate of 0.65 percent

c) a lag of 19 days between initial infection and death. The latter two are derived from US Centers for Disease Control planning scenarios available here:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/planning-scenarios.html>. The CDC’s best estimate for infection fatality rate of 0.65 is based on Meyerowitz-Katz, G., & Merone, L, (2020), A systematic review and meta-analysis of published research data on COVID-19 infection-fatality rates, *medRxiv*.

While crude, the approximation is far closer to reality than the official tally of positive tests, particularly during the early stages of the pandemic when testing was exceedingly scarce. Seroprevalence studies (e.g., here:

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1047279720302015#bib36>) suggest infection rates of the same magnitude as the method used by the authors.



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