Study of New York City transit workers spotlights pandemic's ongoing physical and emotional toll

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Public health researchers at New York University this week released the results of a pilot study documenting the extraordinary strain of the pandemic on New York City transit workers.

At least 146 city transit workers have already died from COVID-19. The study documents near universal concern about contracting the virus on the job, widespread feelings of anxiety or depression, and fear about safety while on duty. It also raises questions about the rate of infection, suggesting cases may be far higher than currently admitted by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) and other state officials.

A team of researchers in August sent out approximately 3,000 anonymous surveys to transit workers who are members of Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100, which includes 38,000 front-line subway, bus, station and maintenance workers employed by the MTA. More than 700 responded, with 645 complete surveys.

Nearly a quarter of workers reported they had either been told by their doctor they had the infection, tested positive for the virus or antibodies, or were hospitalized with COVID-19. If extended to the entire front-line workforce, this would mean many more workers contracted the disease than has been previously reported.

In May, results from a state study estimated 14 percent of transit workers in downstate New York were positive for antibodies. Part of the discrepancy between the NYU survey and the antibody study could be explained by the three-month lapse between them.

The MTA has disputed the NYU study outright, citing internal statistics of 3,900 cases, or seven percent of the New York City Transit Authority's 53,000 employees, which also includes 15,000 non-TWU workers. "They basically took a smaller group of employees, sent a survey, whoever responded, responded and they ended up with a different number than we did," interim Transit Authority President Sarah Feinberg told WCBS radio.

Feinberg's response is in line with the agency's efforts to downplay the impact of the coronavirus on the transit system throughout the pandemic. The agency has touted findings that minimize the role that public transit played in transmitting the virus, while dismissing those that raise alarm. However, there is no plausible explanation for the extraordinary death toll and large numbers of workers who contracted the disease other than to acknowledge that the transit system itself was a major factor in spreading the contagion.

More than 10,000 MTA workers have been out on quarantine due to illness or exposure, casting doubt on the official agency infection count. Furthermore, as a WSWS review of the pandemic's timeline in transit detailed, the chaotic and criminally negligent response by government, transit agency and TWU union officials meant that thousands of workers were forced to remain on the job without even the most minimal protective gear. Thousands of workers were allowed to be exposed to the deadly virus and unable to even get tested.

The reflex of the MTA to dismiss the findings is driven by the political imperative to execute the reopening plans of Democrats Mayor Bill de Blasio and Governor Andrew Cuomo. A fully functional transit system in New York City is a linchpin in the reopening

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drive, without which millions could not reach their workplaces. The aim of transit officials is to convince workers and riders that the system is safe, despite lingering concern due to lack of social distancing and the lack of compliance with mask mandates.

For transit workers, the potential of contracting the virus on the job remains a critical issue. Approximately 40 percent of workers responding to the survey indicated pre-existing conditions that pose an elevated risk from infection. More than 70 percent expressed concern about long-term health impacts.

In fact, the lasting consequences are already being felt, though not always in ways that are immediately visible. “After every major disaster event, a portion of those intensely exposed have been found to suffer from PTSD [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder] in the short term.... some of these individuals go on to develop long-term PTSD,” Dr. Robyn Gershon, the lead researcher of the study, explained to the WSWS via email. “This can be devastating to the person and lead to chronic health and mental health problems. People who feel their lives have been threatened can be seriously and negatively impacted.”

More than three-quarters of transit workers personally knew a co-worker who died. Roughly 60 percent indicated feeling “nervous, anxious, on-edge, and cannot control worrying,” and 15 percent felt “isolated, down, depressed or hopeless.”

The psychological trauma of transit workers reflects common conditions experienced by workers across industries and on every continent. It is being exacerbated as the ruling class more openly turns to policies of herd immunity in country after country.

For transit workers, they are not only on the front lines of the health crisis, but come face to face with the explosive social tensions in a city riven by extreme inequality and rising poverty. Half of the city’s residents are going through serious economic hardship at present. The disastrous economic conditions combine with a noxious political atmosphere in which the president of the United States is leading an effort to undermine basic public health measures such as mask use.

Transit workers are often placed in the unenviable position of enforcing the state’s mask mandate in the subway and bus system. More than 70 percent of transit workers report fear for their own safety while at work. As of last month, workers reported at least 170 instances of harassment or assault related to mask usage. The instigators include not only riders who refuse to put on masks, but also those who are upset at transit workers for not enforcing the mask requirement.

The experience of transit workers since March has yielded a striking lack of confidence in the entire political establishment. When asked in the survey about sources of reliable information, just 16 percent indicated trust in Governor Cuomo, 14 percent in TWU leadership, and 5 percent in Mayor de Blasio.

This distrust in all the institutions of capitalist rule, emerging from the tragic experience of the past months, is not only entirely justified, but also foreshadows what will come next: a major eruption of class struggle against both big business parties and their criminal indifference to workers’ lives. To take this fight forward, transit workers should form rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the TWU, to fight unsafe conditions and austerity, and to mobilize the full strength of the working class in New York City and beyond.

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