

New York City halts indoor dining but keeps schools open as second coronavirus wave accelerates

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A second wave of COVID-19 is well underway in and around New York City, the largest city in the US and the world epicenter of the pandemic during much of the spring. Even as cases, hospitalizations and deaths climb to levels not seen in months, state and local governments headed by Democrats have kept schools and most businesses open. The measures taken in the spring—the shutting down of schools and many businesses—as belated as they were, are to be avoided at all costs in the eyes of the ruling class and its political representatives.

Most significantly, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio has begun reopening the city's public schools, allowing up to 200,000 students to return to classrooms on December 7 and additional special education students December 10, after briefly closing them last month and moving instruction online. De Blasio, a “progressive” Democrat, has abandoned the three percent maximum test positivity rate for in-person learning. With the consent of the unions he has reopened schools, despite a 5.53 percent seven-day average test positivity rate as of this writing, with no sign of declining below three percent. De Blasio's efforts to reopen the schools have sparked outrage among New York City educators.

Over 15,000 people have tested positive within New York City in the past week alone, and over 1,300 COVID-19 patients have been hospitalized over the past week, compared to a weekly average over the past four weeks of less than 1,000. Additionally, 127 people have died over the past week, compared to a weekly average over the past four weeks of 97. These trends are all increasing, especially when compared to the relative lull of the summer months.

In this context, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo's announcement that indoor dining in New York City would halt beginning today assumes an almost farcical

character. While indoor dining has no doubt contributed to the spread of the coronavirus—officials told a recent news conference that it was fifth or sixth in terms of sources of contact-traced outbreaks—the fact that most businesses and workplaces remain open and that schools are reopening exposes the move to take-out as window-dressing for a murderous herd immunity strategy.

According to state data, over 33,000 students and staff have already tested positive since the beginning of the school year. This number is no doubt an undercount, given that younger children often have few, if any, symptoms. Moreover, this very fact also makes it so that schoolchildren can easily act as intermediaries for the coronavirus between adults, accelerating outbreaks in the broader community. Studies and practical experience have shown that closing schools is one of the most effective public health measures that can be taken during the pandemic.

Having been caught unprepared during the catastrophic first wave of the pandemic in the spring—which cost the lives of tens of thousands of mostly poor New Yorkers—hospitals are steeling themselves for this second wave. Most have expanded intensive care unit (ICU) capacity, some have new negative-pressure rooms and most claim to have a stockpile of personal protective equipment (PPE).

A nurse at Lenox Hill Hospital, a private non-profit on the Upper East Side, told the *World Socialist Web Site* recently that her new employer has better nurse-to-patient ratios than when she worked at a hospital in the Bronx. She spoke to the WSWS in April while she worked at that Bronx hospital, describing how the emergency department (ED) was overwhelmed by the first wave of the pandemic.

Elmhurst Hospital Center, part of New York City's public network Health + Hospitals (H+H), has also hired

nurses in recent days. Last week, a nurse at Elmhurst told the WSWS that new cases were rising sharply, going from 3 or 4 per day to over 30 in a matter of days.

She also told the WSWS that, while the situation is under control now, in a couple of weeks the caseload will likely be uncontrollable, even with the additional staff.

A nurse at Jacobi Medical Center, an H+H hospital in the Bronx, told the WSWS that cases are also rising at her hospital.

The situations at Elmhurst and Jacobi mirror the situation at Lenox Hill; the nurse working there told the WSWS, “In terms of patients coming into the ED, the second wave is already here.”

She continued: “A lot of health care workers are really exhausted, physically and mentally. I don’t know what’s going to happen if it gets as bad again as in spring. It’s going to be scary, because all of us are tired, especially the people who are on the front line. This is a lot on us. At the end of the day it’s humans treating humans. Even though it’s our job, the people supposed to be protecting these people are exhausted.”

Nurses have still had to struggle for sufficient PPE and staffing, two of the most important factors in hospital preparedness. Nurses at New Rochelle Hospital in Westchester County and Albany Medical Center in the state capital recently waged courageous strikes which were isolated and limited by the New York State Nurses Association (NYSNA). PPE and staffing were major concerns in the strikes, and are shared by nurses across the country and, indeed, globally.

The horrors of the spring—when understaffed and underequipped health systems collapsed under the weight of the surge, resulting in unnecessary deaths of health care workers and patients alike—left many nurses with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and many fear a return to the conditions of the first wave.

The Lenox Hill nurse told the WSWS that she believes many of her coworkers have PTSD. “I realized that when people asked me what it was like to work in an ED during the spring, I don’t really like to talk about it much,” she said. “I’m trying to block it and not remember it. In fact, I don’t remember much, my therapist said that my mind was so stressed that it seeks to block it, doesn’t want to think about it.”

Nurses are not the only section of workers engaging in struggles. Workers at a Chipotle restaurant in the Bronx held a walkout earlier this month after they found out that one of their coworkers had tested positive for COVID-19 but none of them had been notified by management.

One employee told NY1: “No email, no text message, no call—I had to hear it from a coworker that heard from another coworker, that heard from another coworker. It’s not fair for Chipotle to keep us working right now, knowing very well that there is an active case of COVID in Chipotle right now.” Chipotle confirmed to NY1 that a worker had been tested positive and claimed after the walkout that workers who had been in close contact with that worker would be quarantined with pay.

The situation is similar in other industries. Trader Joe’s workers have said that the grocery chain has placed workers “in a state of terror,” as one worker told Gothamist. Workers describe inadequate cleaning, inconsistent enforcement of mask-wearing and social-distancing protocols, and cramped breakrooms. Additionally, they are not always informed by management of positive cases among their coworkers.

One worker told Gothamist that it has been circulating at their store, adding, “If I were in charge, the only morally defensible option would be to shut down the store, get everyone rapid tested and only let people back who get negative tests.”

Such a sensible, public-health-oriented response to an outbreak can only be made universal through the working class intervening into the pandemic with a program to close nonessential businesses and guarantee proper safety measures at those businesses which are essential, coupled with income support for workers and small business owners. The opposition among teachers, nurses, grocery workers and food service workers to the pandemic raging out of control must unite and be armed with the program of the Socialist Equality Party.



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