

Eight deaths as hundreds of Chicago transit workers infected by COVID-19

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The *Chicago Sun-Times* recently published a report analyzing records of documented COVID-19 cases among Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) workers since mid-March. The report found that nearly 900 CTA workers have contracted the virus over the span of the pandemic, with at least eight dying from the virus. Deemed essential, CTA workers have worked through the entirety of the pandemic.

The *Sun-Times* notes that the two busiest bus routes, No. 79 and No. 49, have seen the most COVID-19 cases among bus drivers. Meanwhile, other routes, No. 4, No. 8 and No. 22 each saw eight drivers infected over the same period. Routes No. 3, No. 20, No. 29 and No. 72 each saw seven drivers test positive for coronavirus.

These nine routes provide transportation for tens of thousands of people a day. According to the *Sun-Times* they transported more than 65,000 people on an average weekday in September. The large number of people using these buses creates a high risk of COVID-19 transmission.

In November, the media leaked a list of locations linked to COVID-19 infections. Among the workplaces the state identified as centers of COVID-19 outbreaks was the CTA.

CTA workers have voiced their concerns about the inadequate safety measures in place and the lack of enforcement. Cedric Trice, 54, a veteran bus driver for the CTA who was interviewed by *Northwestern Medill*, said, “A lot of passengers do not wear masks and they argue with me if I tell them to.” He continued, “We are essential workers, and the number of people who ride the bus each day is putting our lives at risk.”

The safety rules require voluntary compliance by the public. The CTA policy states that employees should not confront unmasked individuals for their own safety.

Northwestern Medill article, Stephens, 64, a resident of the Lakeview neighborhood in Chicago, expressed similar worries as Trice. He tried an experiment where he attempted to ride the bus shirtless (which is prohibited by CTA policy) and wearing a mask. He was not allowed to board, but when Stephens attempted to enter the bus with his shirt on and without a mask, he was allowed entry.

As of this writing, Chicago is experiencing consecutive days of a COVID-19 positivity rate hovering around 12 percent. Meanwhile, Illinois has seen 12 consecutive days of at least 100 daily COVID-19 deaths. All told, more than 16,000 Illinois residents have succumbed to the virus.

As the pandemic rips through Chicago and the rest of the state, CTA representatives expressed indifference toward the concerns of workers and community members like Trice and Stephens. Catherine Hosinski, a spokeswoman for CTA, cited studies asserting, “There’s limited evidence to say that transit is a spreader of coronavirus.”

While CTA spokesman Brian Steele stated it requires employees to report “if they test positive for COVID-19 and to also identify coworkers who were close contacts,” the CTA has not been conducting contact tracing, so it would be near impossible to say whether employees got the virus on the job or through other means. In other words, there may be uncounted CTA worker infections and deaths.

For its part, the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), that claims to represent transit workers, has done nothing to stop the infections among transit workers and worked to assure the CTA and the city’s Democratic administration that workers stay on the job. The ATU has not issued any calls for work stoppages or any kind of job action, let alone advance serious

demands aimed at stopping the spread of the virus among CTA workers. Instead, the ATU has made toothless demands for hazard pay. Meanwhile, the union has called on state and federal legislators for funding support, circulating a petition calling for Congress to “maintain transportation funding at \$15 billion for public transit and \$8 billion for motor coach and school bus industries in the proposed \$908 billion bipartisan coronavirus package.”

The unsafe conditions transit workers confront follow years of transit cuts enacted by the Democratic Party in Chicago, imposed with the help of the ATU.

As one CTA rail worker told the WSWS during the 2017 contract negotiations between the ATU and the CTA, “We don’t get sick days. We get penalized for being sick. What we have is a ‘sick book.’ You can go in one time, the second time, you get a one-day suspension. We’re out in the elements every day with these possibly dirty trains, and hundreds of people coming through. If you get sick more than one time, you get suspended for a day. And then the third time, you get suspended for three days. That is why there is a lot of FMLA [Family and Medical Leave Act] usage.”

In New York City, transit workers are facing similar deadly conditions, enforced by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) and Transport Workers Union, which covers NYC transit workers. At least 126 New York City transit workers have already died from COVID-19.

Similar conditions exist internationally. In London, where transit workers have formed a rank-and-file safety committee, bus drivers have spoken out against the deadly conditions permitted by the government and unions. Miles Driver, a member of the London Bus Drivers Rank-and-File Safety Committee, said, “When the pandemic struck, workers were left defenseless. We only discovered our fellow drivers were dying [from COVID-19] because their relatives went to the media. Unite [the union representing drivers] actively colluded with management to conceal the extent of the health emergency, then sent us back to work.”

The welcome news that a COVID-19 vaccine is now being distributed makes it all the more urgent for workers to protect themselves. However, It will take months before the vaccine makes serious inroads against the spread of the virus. A report by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) at the

University of Washington, published on December 4, states, “despite vaccination scale-up, we expect 539,000 cumulative deaths by April 1.” That is, 240,000 more people will die, nearly a quarter of a million people, before the vaccine produces a significant impact on infections and deaths.

The situation facing Chicago transit workers is being replicated around the world in schools, offices, workplaces, and factories. Capitalist governments have embraced the deadly policy of “herd immunity,” letting the virus rip through society to infect as many as possible. The primary motive behind the insanity of such a policy is the prioritization of profits over human lives.

The unions and the capitalist governments will do nothing to stop the wave of COVID-19 infections and deaths. Workers must take up this fight on their own by forming rank-and-file committees independent of the ATU and big business politicians.

The Socialist Equality Party calls for transit workers to break from their discredited unions and form new organizations of struggle, rank-and-file committees. These organizations, which are democratically controlled by and represent workers, should unite with other sections of workers in health care, logistics, education, service and manufacturing, in the United States and globally, in a struggle to defend lives and jobs. These committees must demand the prioritization of health and safety over the mad rush for profits.

We urge you to contact the Socialist Equality Party today to carry forward this fight.

For help starting a rank-and-file safety committee at your workplace, contact us at wsws.org/contact.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact