

ICUs begin filling up in New York City as Cuomo, de Blasio dither on effective pandemic restrictions

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Intensive care unit (ICU) occupancy is climbing toward capacity in several hospitals in New York City. With cases, test positivity rates and hospitalizations continuing to increase, it is only a matter of time until overall city ICU capacity is strained beyond capacity, resulting in an even greater loss of life than has already occurred.

According to data from the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), two hospitals, Flushing Hospital Medical Center and NewYork-Presbyterian Brooklyn Methodist Hospital, are already above 100 percent ICU capacity, and four others in New York City, including Staten Island University Hospital, are at or above 90 percent capacity.

Several hospitals across the New York City area have fewer than five available ICU beds, including University Hospital in Newark, New Jersey, and Nassau University Medical Center on Long Island.

While overall capacity is around 20 percent according to HHS data (which has a delay of a week or more), at least some of this appears to be due to increasing ICU bed capacity, according to *Gothamist*. Even if additional beds are added, staffing and equipment are needed to properly treat COVID-19 patients.

Moreover, even if there is capacity elsewhere in the city or state, if an individual hospital is overwhelmed this can cause a localized spike in deaths. Even though hospitals are transferring patients more often than they did in the disastrous early stages of the pandemic, it is difficult to safely transfer patients who require intensive care or are nearing that point.

The past week has seen 189 deaths in New York City alone, an increase from the 152 deaths on average the prior four weeks. Similarly, there have been 1,439

hospitalizations in the past week compared to 1,283 on average in the preceding four weeks.

With the more infectious COVID-19 variant that originated in the United Kingdom almost certainly circulating in New York already, the only way to avert a staggering increase in cases, hospitalizations and deaths rivaling the spring is through significant measures to reduce the spread of the disease, particularly the immediate closure of schools and nonessential businesses, the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE) and safe working environments to those working in essential industries, and the guarantee of full income protection for workers and small businesses affected by shutdown measures.

Instead of making any efforts along these lines, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo and New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, both Democrats, have enacted ludicrously limited measures under the state's "micro-cluster strategy." The strategy, which involves Cuomo designating geographic areas as yellow, orange or red zones and applying limited measures per tier, is wholly inadequate to stop the spread of COVID-19, as evidenced by steadily increasing cases and deaths.

As of this writing, large portions of Queens and the Bronx, as well as smaller portions of Brooklyn and Manhattan, have been designated as yellow zones. The northern half of Staten Island is a yellow zone, while its southern half is an orange zone. Areas are designated as yellow zones if they exceed a 3 percent test positivity rate and are "in the top 10 percent in the state for hospital admissions per capita over the past week," according to the state Department of Health. In other words, even if every part of the state exceeds 3 percent positivity, at most 10 percent of regions will be

designated yellow zones.

The yellow zone restrictions demonstrate that the “micro” in the state’s “micro-cluster strategy” refers to the restrictions, not to the clusters of cases involved: no more than four people per table (indoor and outdoor dining both allowed), schools remain open, minor restrictions on gatherings.

Even in orange zones—which have a 4 percent test positivity rate and only 15 percent of hospital capacity remaining—the restrictions are inadequate, with schools closing unless they meet state-designated loopholes, indoor dining closed and some capacity restrictions on businesses like gyms.

As of this writing, in addition to southern Staten Island, the cities of Buffalo, Rochester and Syracuse (the second, third and fifth largest cities in the state, respectively) are orange zones surrounded by yellow zones in their suburbs.

While Cuomo has banned indoor dining in New York City, de Blasio has endeavored to reopen schools in the midst of the present surge. Cuomo and de Blasio have both publicly mooted shutdowns, although not until after Christmas and the holiday shopping season.

In particular, Cuomo’s statements have been structured to blame the population for any shutdowns and present them as threats rather than as necessary public health measures which should be coupled with income protection. “We are not destined for a shutdown,” he told a December 23 news conference. “I want to do everything I can to avoid a shutdown.”

Cuomo, no less than President Donald Trump—or, for that matter, de Blasio—represents the interests of the ruling class and seeks to keep businesses open at all costs. For the political representatives of the bourgeoisie, business shutdowns, and especially guaranteeing workers’ income while they stay home, are anathema.

As a case in point, Cuomo ended the Wednesday news conference by saying he was working to bring fans into the Buffalo Bills’ stadium for their upcoming football playoff game.

The ominous news that the new COVID-19 variant originating in the UK may be as much as 70 percent more infectious further underscores the need for emergency measures to contain the virus. While de Blasio enacted some additional quarantine measures for UK travelers, it is likely too late to keep this new

variant from entering the US. Genetic analysis of COVID-19 strains has been limited in New York and has been stepped up only in response to the news of the new UK strain.

Underscoring the terrible toll of the pandemic—with deaths continuing to climb even as vaccinations begin—Evelyn Ford, a 58-year-old dispatcher and emergency medical technician for the New York City Fire Department Bureau of Emergency Medical Services (FDNY EMS), died of COVID-19 on Tuesday. Tuesday also marked the beginning of the vaccination program for EMTs. Twelve FDNY employees have died from COVID-19, with an additional three EMS suicides. Over a third of the FDNY workforce has been infected so far.

The only way to stop the preventable deaths of thousands and tens of thousands like Ford—killed before their times even as vaccines become available—is for the working class to mobilize to shut down nonessential businesses and schools. This is the only way to prevent hospitals from being overwhelmed as they were in the first wave. For workers to accomplish this while guaranteeing income protection, this involves not just a medical struggle against COVID-19 but a political struggle against both the Democratic and Republican parties, both of which are pursuing a murderous policy of herd immunity. Those wishing to avert a winter of death should *contact the World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party to get involved in the struggle today.



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