

Amid surging COVID-19 cases, New York Mayor de Blasio orders 80,000 city workers back to offices

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28 March 2021

In line with the Biden administration's full-court press to reopen the economy within his first 100 days in office, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, a Democrat, ordered 80,000 city workers back to offices starting May 3, despite the steady increase in COVID-19 infections this month and warnings of a "third wave" of infections fueled by more contagious and deadly variants.

"This is an important step on the way to the full recovery of New York City," de Blasio said at a news conference on March 23. "We're going to make it safe, but we need our city workers back in their offices where they can do the most to help their fellow New Yorkers," he added.

This is a bold-faced lie. The vast majority of the city's 325,378 full- and part-time municipal employees, including firefighters, paramedics, police officers and Parks and Sanitation workers, have continued working throughout the pandemic in frontline, public-facing positions. Forcing the tens of thousands of office workers in other roles, who have been able to successfully telework for the past year, back to in-person work on this abbreviated schedule is not based on scientific or health considerations.

It is motivated purely by a political agenda promoted by the Biden White House, with the full support of Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo and the Democratic Party as a whole. That agenda is determined by the interests of the corporate-financial oligarchy and is shared in all essentials by both big business parties. It knowingly sacrifices the lives of workers, including educators, to the ravages of the killer virus in order to ensure the profits and personal fortunes of the capitalist ruling class.

De Blasio's aim is to send a message that the home of Wall Street will be fully open for business in short order.

Once city offices are open, other businesses will be expected to follow suit, coupled with an accelerated relaxation of remaining restrictions on dining, shopping and other activities. Last week, Cuomo also announced that the Mets' and Yankees' baseball stadiums will be open to spectators starting in April. Arts and entertainment venues can also reopen at 33 percent capacity, or a maximum of 100 people indoors and 200 people outdoors. In most cases, the public will be required to show proof of vaccination or a negative test result to enter these venues. How these measures are to be enforced remains unclear.

This reopening of workplaces and entertainment venues can only fuel the spread of the pandemic, including on public transit.

The moves to fully reopen the economy fly in the face of the actual state of the virus, which scientific and medical data confirm is once again accelerating. The city government's website has raised the risk level in the city and surrounding areas from "very high" to "extremely high," as the number of cases in the city increased from 584,963 to 661,434—that is, 76,471 more cases and 7,763 deaths in the month of March. While New York City's test positivity rate remains at roughly 7 percent, 25 zip codes have positivity rates of 10 percent or more.

On March 23, the *New York Daily News* acknowledged: "The statewide positivity rate stood at 4.7 percent, according to the data released Tuesday. That's a hefty increase from the seven-day average of 3.3 percent, suggesting that infections are increasing

rapidly.”

Dr. Anthony Fauci, a member of President Joe Biden’s Coronavirus Task Force, warned that a COVID-19 variant that has shown resistance to antibody treatments and vaccines appears to be spreading “pretty efficiently” through New York. Though this variant is not yet widespread, the turning off and on of restrictions like social distancing, mask-wearing and limiting the size of gatherings threatens to increase community spread of such variants before a sufficient percentage of the population is vaccinated.

In this context, the timing of the mayor’s announcement flies in the face of any rational response to the health crisis confronting millions of New Yorkers. One purpose is to boost Biden’s drive to administer 200 million vaccinations by May. Though proof of vaccination will not be required for entry to city office buildings, fear of having to return to in-person work unvaccinated has sent tens of thousands of city workers who are eligible for the vaccine scrambling to get appointments.

“We’re being sent like canaries into the coal mine,” one city worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “There is absolutely no rational reason we have to go back into the office right now. They’re saying that we will have staggered hours, maybe only be there one day a week. They’re spacing out the work stations, and limiting capacity to 20 percent so we have limited contact with our co-workers.

“They claim they’ve put in all these special ventilation systems and cleaning protocols. But how are we to know that they really are doing what they say they are doing? And what is the point of all these complicated precautions when we could continue working from home for a few more weeks and be in a much safer situation? It makes no sense!”

Waiting a couple of months to send workers back into offices would prevent unnecessary infections and deaths. At present, only 17 percent of city residents have been fully vaccinated, with 27 percent having received just the first dose. By August, this number is projected to reach 70 percent, which, while short of eradicating the disease, at least approaches broader immunity.

The deadly consequences of prematurely reopening the economy in the interests of capitalist profit, regardless the inevitably horrific impact on human life,

have already been amply demonstrated. Brazil has just become the global epicenter of the pandemic, with a staggering surge to 100,000 deaths in the first months of 2021.

The drive to get workers back to work producing profit has already necessitated unsafe reopening of schools for in-person instruction. Once again, New York City, with the largest school district in the country, has set the benchmark for other school districts across the US. Despite serious concerns and opposition from New York educators and parents, K-3 students went back to classrooms in December 2020 after a surge in positivity rates above 3 percent had forced their closure a month earlier. Cuomo and de Blasio abruptly raised the acceptable threshold for positivity rates to 6 percent then 9 percent before dropping the positivity rate as a criterion altogether.

At the same time as he ordered city workers back to offices, de Blasio announced that New York City high school students are being sent back into classrooms for the remaining two-and-a-half months of the school year. Just under 20 percent of high school students are expected to return to fully-in person instruction, the majority continuing to learn remotely or in a hybrid model. Nevertheless, the expectation is that fully in-person learning will be implemented by September, irrespective of the level of coronavirus infections at that time.

This premature reopening mirrors the government’s failure to respond quickly in March 2020 by shutting down all nonessential workplaces and switching to remote work. In May 2020, former Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Tom Frieden said in a CNN interview that implementing social distancing measures *two weeks earlier* could have reduced New York’s coronavirus death toll by up to 80 percent.



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