

750 bodies of New Yorkers who died from COVID-19 last year still held in refrigerated trucks

Philip Guelpa
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Last year, when the disease was running rampant in New York City, thousands of victims were placed in temporary storage when the medical and funerary systems were overwhelmed. Approximately 32,800 New Yorkers are recorded as having died of COVID-19 in the city since last March, though this is likely a significant undercount.

Many families were unable to cope financially and emotionally with the burden of putting their relatives to rest, not to speak of the destitute and homeless who were dying in large numbers. News accounts reported cases of funeral homes storing bodies in unrefrigerated trucks in the street.

While the intensity of the pandemic has somewhat abated in New York, for the moment, the legacy of mass deaths remains. The bodies of hundreds of COVID-19 victims who died during the height of the pandemic last year, when more than 800 New Yorkers were dying every day from the virus, remain “temporarily” stored by the city in refrigerated trucks at a site on the Brooklyn waterfront. At its height, up to 2,000 bodies were held there. Currently, approximately 750 bodies are still being kept at this location.

Many of the victims’ families have requested that they be buried on Hart Island, the city’s cemetery for the poor and unclaimed dead. The city has lost touch with others, some of whom may themselves have also died of the disease. Many families are likely to have been overwhelmed by the price of a funeral, which typically runs into the multiple thousands of dollars, while suffering economic devastation due to the pandemic. The city provides a burial subsidy of only \$1,700, up from \$900 prior to the pandemic. Even this puts the cost of a funeral out of reach for many of the

city’s working class.

FEMA now offers a grant of up to \$9,000 for funeral expenses to families who have lost someone to the disease and have so far received over 17,000 applications nationwide. But there is a complicated application process, which includes the requirement for a death certificate that specifically cites COVID-19 as the cause of death—given the undercount of deaths this will exclude many in need—and excludes applicants who are not US citizens or legal residents, which bars a significant portion of workers in the city.

Others resist having their loved ones buried on Hart Island, due to its perceived stigma as a “paupers cemetery.” In the past, convict labor had been used to bury the dead on Hart Island. At the height of the pandemic, the city switched to the use of a private contractor to conduct the interments.

Hart Island, located at the western end of Long Island Sound in waters off of the Bronx, is the largest public cemetery in the nation, with more than a million interments. It has been the city’s paupers cemetery for 150 years. In 2020, 2,666 people were buried on Hart Island, more than twice the previous yearly average, representing one telling gauge of the pandemic’s impact. A recent study by the Columbia Journalism School’s Stabile Center of Investigative Journalism and a nonprofit news website, The City, reports that one in 10 New Yorkers who died of COVID-19 in 2020 are buried on Hart Island.

Given the utter failure of the capitalist ruling class to mount an effective response to the COVID-19 pandemic, placing the drive to protect profits over any consideration of the health and safety of the vast majority of the population, and the repeat appearance of

new and more deadly variants of the virus, wave after wave of the disease is certain to occur across the globe, exacting an ever-increasing toll of death and debility.

Vaccination alone, without the systematic employment of standard public health measures—closing of schools and nonessential workplaces, along with testing, contact tracing, and quarantining of infected individuals, with full financial support to them and their families—will not stop the pandemic.

The horrific scenes of mass deaths currently taking place in India due to COVID-19 are a stark reminder of similar episodes of devastation that already have and will continue to occur around the world as the pandemic is allowed to rage out of control due to the criminal “herd immunity” policy pursued by the ruling elites in nearly every country.

As long as the response to the pandemic remains under control of the capitalist ruling class, conditions of mass deaths which occurred during earlier waves of the disease and being experienced at the present most sharply in India will become “the new normal.” More refrigerated trucks and mass graves will ensue.

This existential threat to humanity can only be averted by the determined, united action of the working class to overturn capitalism and implement a socialist program to use the vast resources now monopolized by the wealthy elite to put an end to the disease.



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