

# New York City teachers, health care workers boycott Mayor de Blasio's phony "Hometown Heroes" parade as COVID-19 cases grow again

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Last week's "Hometown Heroes" parade hosted by New York City Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio, supposedly celebrating essential workers and the purported "end" of the COVID-19 pandemic, was a debacle. After weeks of promotion, only a few hundred workers showed up for the parade in Manhattan.

The most notable aspect of the parade was that it was boycotted by thousands of health care workers, teachers and other essential workers, highlighting enormous social and political anger among broad layers of the working class.

Ostensibly aimed at recognizing the many thousands of essential workers who have risked their lives in the pandemic over the last year and a half, the parade was, in fact, an attempt to gloss over the political responsibility of the Democratic Party for the deaths of over 33,000 New Yorkers from COVID-19. Among them were at least 160 New York City transit workers, and at least 87 teachers. As of December 2020, at least 680 health care workers in New York and New Jersey had died of COVID-19.

The parade was also designed to provide an air of legitimacy to the Democrats' full reopening policy being spearheaded by the Biden administration in the midst of a worldwide surge of the Delta variant and create a false celebratory atmosphere about the supposed "end" of the pandemic. In fact, New York is already seeing an uptick in cases. The positivity rate has again risen to 1 percent, with the Delta variant now dominant. As one of the first states that fully endorsed the Biden administration's criminal dropping of mask mandates, New York is also systematically scaling back testing and is encouraging contact tracers to apply for other jobs.

Most essential workers, including health care workers,

teachers and transit workers, recognized the parade as a cynical ploy and treated it with the contempt it deserved.

Speaking to the WSWs, several teachers from New York City expressed their social anger and disgust with the parade and the role of the unions. One teacher said, "Why would I participate in a parade celebrating victory when hundreds of New Yorkers and THOUSANDS of Americans continue to be infected with COVID-19?" She stressed, "Workers are still battling COVID and unhoused folks are being thrown into more unsafe conditions during a heat wave to satisfy complaints of the richest people in New York."

A high school teacher in Brooklyn said, "That the UFT leadership would take part in de Blasio's COVID Victory Parade at the same time as the #deltavariant is increasing exponentially in NYC, [and] overall COVID cases are beginning to increase again, vaccination rates in the city are stagnating and the de Blasio/Cuomo NYC Is Open For Business program is seeding a fall/winter of Delta disease/death should surprise me, but it does not. Short-sighted, insular union leadership is what has allowed political officials to put essential employees at risk throughout the pandemic and will continue to do so."

Another teacher told the WSWs, "I did not march because a parade during a pandemic is mind-blowingly ignorant. Our politicians did the same thing in Philly during the Spanish flu of 1918 and, the days thereafter, infections in Philly bloom massively, with sickness and death among civilians increasing 10-fold in just days. I also think the UFT no longer stands up for my rights as a worker or defends my respect as a professional. During this pandemic, I watched as teachers performed above and beyond and simultaneously got vilified by NYC

politicians and parents—for trying not to catch COVID at work and bring it back home to their families and loved ones, over fears of killing them. I am not willing to die for anyone’s cause, let alone politicians, officials and leaders that refuse to stop distancing themselves out of fear over catching COVID—while they simultaneously broadcast zoom meetings telling workers like me it is safe to come back to in-person work.”

Anger over the parade among health care workers was running so high that several EMS unions felt it was necessary to officially boycott the parade.

Speaking to the *Daily News* last week, Liana Espinal, a 36-year-old paramedic, said that de Blasio’s June 14 announcement of the parade “felt like a joke, like a slap in the face. I didn’t think it was real. We don’t want a parade. We want to be able to take care of our families.”

A 28-year veteran paramedic, Carlos Liczano, told the *Daily News*, “I think it’s bogus. It’s BS. I’m not going. This is my silent protest. And a lot of my fellow employees feel slighted too by the mayor. What does a parade do for my bills?”

During the pandemic, EMS workers had to work mandatory 12-hour shifts. At the peak of the pandemic in the city in the spring of 2020, EMS workers would see multiple deaths during a shift and bring sick patients to hospitals, only to be told that no ventilators or beds were left to treat them. EMS workers who are employed by the city did not even receive hazard pay. Wages for EMS workers are so low that many are forced to take on second and third jobs and some paramedics are forced to live in their cars because they cannot afford rent in the city.

The unions have done absolutely nothing to ameliorate the positions of EMS and other essential workers and their official boycott was largely a desperate effort to save face in front of their angry membership. During the pandemic, the EMS unions helped implement a new schedule that permanently forces them to work longer.

A nurse at Jacobi Medical center told the WSWs that her colleagues either “do not know or do not care” about the parade and stressed, “None of the city workers received hazard pay. None.”

In hospitals, tensions are running high. There are acute staff shortages as many workers—exhausted, traumatized and angered by the experience of the pandemic—are leaving the field. Last week, the WSWs spoke to several workers outside Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital, part of one of the largest hospital networks in the country and the world. Many of them expressed support for the strike of St. Vincent nurses in Worcester and spontaneously asked

“How can I help?”

A registered nurse described conditions at Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital: “A lot of my coworkers have recently resigned. It is sad because they used to love their jobs. They have family and are afraid to not be able to go back to them. It is not only nurses but also doctors. Many were planning to leave the field before the pandemic, but this situation pushed them [to the brink].

“The resignations have mostly been recently, right after the peak of the pandemic when you have time to sit down and analyze. At the beginning of the pandemic, everybody was willing to work here. It was hard for us, and we have a relatively good hospital, so I cannot even imagine how it was in rural hospitals. We could not even find gloves here. It was like the perfect horrible storm.

“I can assure you that everyone who is in a hospital now is very committed to their careers and their patients. It is a rough situation because you do not want to run away. You’re needed here but you’re also needed by your family and you need to decide who needs you the most.

“We honestly do not see the end of this. We see all of these countries experiencing surges. It breaks our hearts to see our colleagues in India. We cannot help them. We do not know what is coming. We are preparing for the worst and hoping for the best. We’re just afraid that people are not taking this seriously and the CDC [which has lifted masking guidelines] are not helping. Most of us will not have had time to talk about this. I am just realizing this as I am talking to you.”

A resident physician in pathology said, “I feel like a cog in the wheel—this is not what I went into medicine for. I went into medicine to really make a change for the better and it does not feel like that is what I am doing now. So much of what I do is dictated by matters relating either to insurance or logistics that do not directly have anything to do with patient care. Everyone working here is very stressed; it is a very tense atmosphere. The nurses are very overstretched; they are overworked, it is not fair to anyone. As you say, it is the whole system, we are wage laborers.”



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