

# Thirty-seven deaths among New York City transit workers so far this year as city's infrastructure continues to crumble

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At least 37 active Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) workers in New York City have died so far this year, according to official statistics. While the cause of death is often not specified, there is little doubt most, if not all, are due to COVID-19.

Last year, the transit agency acknowledged more than 130 deaths among workers. However, a tally by rank-and-file workers suggests the official count may underestimate deaths significantly, with as many as 188 transit workers dying since March 2020.

While government officials and the corporate media continue to portray the pandemic as a thing of the past, the grim reality for transit workers is that the coronavirus continues to exact a horrific toll. Every month, Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) officials read the names of new victims at their board meetings. In June, they reported the deaths of an electrical equipment maintainer, a station agent and a locomotive engineer. In May, they announced the names of six transit workers who had perished. They announced five in April, including a 33-year-old father of three.

But aside from perfunctory moments of silence at the board meetings and rare posts on the Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100's social media pages, there has been a deafening silence over the extraordinary and ongoing carnage. Mass death is treated like an ordinary hazard of the job, much the same as a sprained ankle or a sore back. The main concern for New York's ruling class lies not in protecting workers' lives but in ensuring that public transit, a precondition in the country's most densely-populated large city to keeping profit flowing for the corporate and financial elite, returns to some sense of

normal.

Following the reopening of New York City, a new normal is emerging for transit workers and riders consisting of the normalization of death, failing service and stepped-up attacks on jobs.

At the same time as they virtually ignore COVID-related deaths in the transit system, the media and the TWU have sensationalized incidents of assault on the city's buses and subways in order to whip up a law-and-order campaign for hundreds of more cops in the transit system and to center this year's mayoral election on crime rather than social inequality and the pandemic.

With the Delta variant triggering a resurgence of the pandemic, officials at every level of government have continued to press ahead with eliminating what minimal protections remain. Taking his lead from President Biden's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Governor Andrew Cuomo scrapped statewide mask mandates and restrictions on indoor occupancy in June. While formally masks remain required at indoor stations and on buses and trains, the broader policy shift has undermined compliance. The MTA has long since abandoned rear boarding on buses, which provided a buffer between passengers and drivers, and never addressed many issues with the deplorable state of crew rooms and locker rooms.

The battered transit workforce has seen its numbers decline precipitously, severely impacting bus and subway service operations. During the pandemic, the MTA extended its ongoing hiring freeze despite an increased pace of workers retiring and quitting. In May, the number of agency employees fell to 67,062, down from 72,388 in April of 2019. In just over two years, the MTA has cut more than 5,300 jobs, including 2,216

in operations (train operators, bus drivers, etc.) and 2,161 maintenance personnel.

The inevitable consequence has been months of severe service disruptions and increased wait times throughout the system. Some routes, such as the A and C lines connecting upper Manhattan to Brooklyn and Southern Queens, have been plagued with extensive delays, making already long commutes even longer. Last month, worker shortages alone led to the cancellation of nearly 11,000 subway trips. By comparison, staff shortages in June 2019 caused approximately 750 scrapped trips.

Sarah Feinberg, the interim president of the New York City Transit Authority (the division of the MTA responsible for subways and buses), indicated in a series of interviews last week that the agency is nowhere near close to resolving the worker shortage. She refused to commit to backfilling the job losses with trained replacements by September, when schools resume and many offices are planning to reopen. Instead, she attempted to justify the hiring freeze, which took place while the federal government was pledging unlimited funds to bail out Wall Street, as the only alternative to furloughs and layoffs.

Feinberg also took no responsibility for policies that forced workers into deadly conditions and set off a wave of workers leaving due to health and safety concerns.

The MTA has long attempted to reduce operational costs by attacking jobs. Before receiving temporary injections of federal funding, the agency prepared a plan to lay off more than 9,000 employees. Those layoffs have been put on hold, but the groundwork has been laid for further downsizing.

One of the primary targets is station agents, whose jobs staffing the booths at subway stations are under renewed attack as the MTA implements its new fare payments system, OMNY. During the pandemic, the agency suspended cash transactions at the booths, seeking to eliminate one of the main functions of station agents. Officials have refused to commit to resuming the service.

The MTA also attempted to eliminate 185 agent positions among those assigned to cover booths during lunch breaks of the regular staff. A judge has halted the cuts for now because the MTA hadn't gone through the necessary public comment procedure.

There is also a growing push to combine the jobs of train operators and conductors, leaving a single worker to operate each subway train. In the face of a worker shortage, the Citizens Budget Commission (CBC), a prominent “non-partisan” voice of Wall Street, released a report calling on the MTA to shift to one-person train operations.

The CBC's report was highlighted by the *New York Times* in a recent article on the worker shortage. Underscoring the utter indifference to the workers whose lives and health have been destroyed over the past year and a half, the commission also demanded transit workers and retirees pay more for health care.



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