

Carnival Cruise Line crew member suicide marks forced reopening of cruise ship industry

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Last Tuesday, July 27, a crew member working aboard Carnival Cruise Line's ship Mardi Gras committed suicide. According to an article published on Cruisemapper.com Saturday the employee was a young man from Brazil. "A mental health professional has been sent to Mardi Gras to talk with the crew and provide support after the accident," the report stated. The worker's name has not been made public.

The ship is the company's newest and largest. Its inaugural voyage from Port Canaveral, Florida, which began Saturday, just four days after the worker's death, was met with praise by local and industry media. Carnival's plans to debut the Mardi Gras in summer 2020 were delayed due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent shutdown of the industry in March of last year.

Last year was the most tumultuous period in the history of the cruising industry, in which approximately 200,000 workers were stranded at sea around the world at the outset of the pandemic. As international governments placed severe restrictions on global travel, the companies took months to repatriate workers, leaving thousands completely in the dark on when they would be able to return to their families. In the spring of 2020, there were nearly a dozen non-COVID-related deaths among cruise crew which were widely attributed to suicide in relation to the excruciating uncertainty of their situation.

The potential for coronavirus infection to spread rapidly on ships was demonstrated as early as mid-February of 2020, where over 700 people were infected and 14 subsequently died in an outbreak on the Diamond Princess, a vessel with a capacity of only 3,700. Further outbreaks on cruise ships prompted

emergency response by world governments and corporate shore side operations. In total, there were over 3,000 infections and 77 COVID-19 deaths on cruise ships last year.

The reopening of the industry, which began with the lifting of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) "No Sail" order in the fall of 2020 and the subsequent implementation of its updated, "phased" regulations, has been a highly unstable and protracted process, the burden of which has fallen heavily on workers. Late April saw yet another crew suicide, which was concurrent with the announcement by Royal Caribbean Group that it would not permit its Indian employees to embark due to the explosion of COVID-19 cases in the country.

Although smaller and fewer than they were before the shutdown, coronavirus outbreaks have continued to arise on cruise ships despite rigorous mitigation measures. CNBC reported Friday that six passengers on board Royal Caribbean's Adventure of the Seas tested positive for COVID-19, four of whom were fully vaccinated and two of whom were unvaccinated minors. The individuals were not part of the same travel group. Another small group of infections was identified on the Carnival Vista according to a CNN report Thursday.

In a measure of the sheer volatility of the cruise industry, news of the positive cases on the Adventure of the Seas was followed by a prompt drop of nearly 4 percent in Royal Caribbean's stock price.

The push to restart sailings has been accompanied by the promotion of the most vicious forms of anti-lockdown, anti-science and anti-vaccine politics in America. Republican Florida Governor Ron DeSantis,

who was a strong political ally of ex-President Donald Trump, has filed multiple federal lawsuits against the CDC to push for the unrestricted reopening of cruises.

In the spring of this year, the Florida legislature passed a bill which banned all businesses from mandating proof of vaccination from their customers. On Friday, DeSantis signed an emergency executive order allowing the state to deprive of funds schools which implement mask mandates, in defiance of the CDC's recent backpedaling on their masking recommendation.

DeSantis has continuously pledged to bring an end to any and all pandemic restrictions. Florida, the seat of the cruising industry, is first in the country in terms of the number of daily new COVID-19 infections and first in the country in terms of new deaths, with the seven-day average over 19,000 and nearly 90, respectively.

These numbers, which are likely severe underestimations, are on track to quickly shatter their highs since the beginning of the pandemic. The state accounts for approximately 20 percent of all of the country's new infections. Despite this crisis, DeSantis has doubled down on his "herd immunity" policies and rhetoric, denouncing mask requirements and blaming immigrants for the recent increases in infections.

Cruise ship workers have had their lives and livelihoods devastated by the impact of the pandemic on their industry. Many have remained unemployed, or have been forced to rebuild their occupations from the ground up, often taking jobs which pay far less than they were making on ships and incurring living expenses which do not match their meager salaries.

One cruise ship crew member from Mauritius, who was stranded on a ship for several months during last year's shutdown, told the WSWS: "In my country, COVID is not over yet, but the government is acting like it is. Infections are increasing even among people who have had both doses of the vaccine. Right now, I'm looking to go back to working on ships, but I'm actually really sad about it. I'm only doing it because I cannot make ends meet here. I don't really want to go back."

Under these circumstances, it is no surprise that crew members forced back to work by economic pressures are finding themselves in conditions just as desperate as they were before. Even if, as the industry representatives, media pundits and politicians insist, it

is possible for cruises to be operated safely in the midst of a global pandemic—a possibility which seems increasingly unlikely as the Delta variant rips through the world—ship employees will inevitably bear the brunt of whatever fallout and consequences result from the complications along the way.

The WSWS urges crew both on ship and at home to build rank-and-file committees in association with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. They must prepare themselves to confront the disasters which loom ahead of the global cruising industry. They cannot place one iota of confidence in the companies, governmental agencies or bankrupt labor union bureaucracies.

Cruise crew should seek inspiration from the nearly 3,000 Volvo Trucks workers in Dublin, Virginia, who took a stand against the company and the United Auto Workers union in their nearly two-month-long struggle against the auto manufacturer. Their fight won the support from their class brothers and sisters around the world. Their struggle harnessed the power of the international working class—the only social force capable of opposing all of the horrors of the modern world, from unemployment, low wages and austerity to backwardness and war.



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