

Chaotic CUNY reopening sparks opposition from faculty, students and staff

Jesse Thomas**3 September 2021**

August 30 marked the first day of the City University of New York's 2021-2022 academic year.

The reopening had been touted by the CUNY administration as a victory over the pandemic. This was in line with the New York City government's reckless and delusional #homecoming campaign and its criminal drive to reopen K-12 schools, under conditions where the majority of the city's children remain ineligible for the COVID-19 vaccine.

The resumption of mass, in-person learning will inevitably lead to a sharp increase in infections, hospitalizations and deaths among students, professors and staff, as well as their family members, friends and loved ones.

The CUNY system is the largest municipal university system in the US. It has an enrollment of over a quarter of a million students and nearly 50,000 employees, including approximately 20,000 non-academic and 30,000 academic staff. The City College system is functionally integrated into the professional, industrial, commercial educational and cultural life of the nation's most populous city.

"Approximately 45 percent of the nearly 50,000 course sections across CUNY's 25 colleges and campuses will be conveyed in a hybrid or in-person format, while some 55 percent will be delivered online," the university system's website states.

The administration initially mandated that all students participating in face-to-face instruction show proof of vaccination, but allowed those with religious or medical objections to be exempt.

After an outcry from faculty and staff opposing non-vaccinated individuals being admitted onto campus, the policy was changed to require all students to become vaccinated and submit documentation by September 27 or face academic consequences. This decision coincided with the Food and Drug Administration's full authorization of the Pfizer vaccine last week.

CUNY students and staff have criticized this change as being too little, too late, as the deadline for proof of vaccination will come nearly a month after classes begin.

The current official seven-day average for new infections in New York, just above 1,700, is nearly six times higher than three months ago, while hospitalizations have increased by a

factor of more than two since the beginning of the summer. The largest increase in positive cases in the city, according to Department of Health (DOH) data, is among residents aged 18 to 24, and 25 to 34, approximately 70 percent of whom are fully vaccinated.

The DOH released a memo on August 23 on breakthrough infections, which warned that vaccinated individuals had the potential to spread the Delta variant, possibly just as severely as non-vaccinated persons.

Only 15 percent of New York City residents aged 12 to 17 have received two doses of the vaccine, and no vaccine has as yet been approved for children below this age. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has reported a surge in childhood infections, with more than 180,000 new positive test results and 24 deaths among US children in the third week of August.

A recent outbreak at Duke University in North Carolina, a university with similar COVID-19 mitigation policies as CUNY's, saw over 350 positive test results in a student population that was 98 percent vaccinated. The administration responded by allowing for more remote class options, shutting down indoor dining, and requiring masking outdoors as well as indoors. This indicates that even with strict mitigation policies, the spread of infections is still inevitable unless full shutdowns are implemented.

These figures by themselves undermine the narrative pushed by the New York City government along with the corporate and media establishment that the individual choice to become vaccinated is the singular mechanism for ending the pandemic. The drive to reopen universities under these conditions very clearly spells disaster.

The efforts of CUNY to force the resumption of in-person learning have been met with outright hostility by students, faculty, staff and parents. An August 20 report in CUNY Queens College's student-led newspaper warned of rising sympathy for strike action.

Last week, an anonymous twitter account tagged "COVID @ CUNY" was launched for CUNY faculty to submit reopening safety concerns and express opposition to the reopening. The account was created by a member of the Professorial Staff Congress (PSC), the union that nominally represents the 30,000 CUNY employees, though the account states that it is not

officially sanctioned by the PSC.

“[CUNY] John Jay [College] employees have been threatened with dismissal if they choose to hold a hybrid or in-person class online, even temporarily, out of safety concerns,” one submission reported. Another submission said, “I’m teaching with nearly 40 in an unventilated, windowless basement room designed for 25, because my [department] added extra students. They promised not to do this but they lied. No permission for [temporary] remote [classes], and we’ve been warned.”

Another anonymous user wrote: “[CUNY] Hunter College is opening more than any other campus for no reason... It’s clear the safety plan is rooted in open windows and magical thinking. We wrote up a lot of spaces on our [safety] walkthrough, and they have no answers for logical questions.”

Another user wrote: “The queue to get [a student identification card] at [CUNY Borough of Manhattan Community College] is massive and packed into a theatre. No social distancing, just skipping a seat each. No skipped rows... Full regular size classrooms with unmasked professors too.”

One parent shared a photograph of a Hunter College auditorium jam-packed with students, adding the following comment: “Approximately 900 students, according to the professor, for my son’s class, a chemistry lecture that could have been on Zoom. Irresponsible given the Delta Variant. WTF, Hunter College?”

In response to and in anticipation of opposition to this week’s reopening, several tightly-controlled protest events have been organized by the PSC. The PSC is Local 2334 of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). The AFT played an instrumental role in suppressing the graduate student strike the University of Michigan in September of 2020. Its millionaire president, Randi Weingarten, has worked with the Biden administration to herd millions of unvaccinated children into unsafe schools.

Last Tuesday, the PSC organized a press conference at CUNY headquarters in midtown Manhattan, which was followed by a small rally at Hunter College on Thursday and a similar event at CUNY Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn on Tuesday.

At each of these events, popular opposition to reopening has been channeled behind the #CUNYSafeReturn narrative, although the discontent is quickly spiraling out of control.

Speakers at Tuesday’s press conference included PSC President James Davis and Vice President Andrea Vásquez. It featured appeals written by local and state politicians for the CUNY administration to “do the right thing,” urging it to follow safety protocols on proper ventilation and masking. Nowhere present in any of the events was the demand to shut down in-person learning until the pandemic is eradicated.

In response to the livestream of the press conference, one online commenter wrote that “all students and staff should stay home working remotely for the whole entire school year.”

Another wrote, “[W]e don’t want to return to ‘normal’

where adjuncts are disposable, tuition increases, cuts to funding, hiring freeze, crumbling infrastructure. We need to become strike ready! And make demands for the COMMON GOOD in solidarity with the working class around the world. We wouldn’t be in this situation right now if we had a union that wasn’t scared of the word STRIKE.”

The latter user was referring to the already atrocious conditions faced by thousands of academic workers not only at CUNY but across the country. The precariousness of the situation facing this section of the working class has been greatly exacerbated by the pandemic.

In the spring and summer of last year, the CUNY administration used the health crisis as a pretext to lay off approximately 2,800 adjuncts and staff. It then breached contract and withheld raises indefinitely from around 2,500 of its lowest-paid workers, including assistant staff and lecturers making under \$47,000 annually in one of the most expensive cities in the country. Class sizes were also increased, with the administration citing low enrollment and budgetary problems.

At New York University (NYU) and Columbia University in the spring of 2021, graduate student workers took strike action against similar “COVID austerity” attacks. The 2020 University of Michigan graduate student strike was triggered by massive opposition to the same brutal conditions.

At NYU, Columbia and University of Michigan, strikers had to fight against not only the administration, but also their respective unions, the United Auto Workers (UAW) in the case of NYU and Columbia, the AFT in the case of Michigan. The union bureaucracy systematically worked to isolate the struggles and prevent them from gaining broader momentum.

CUNY students and employees face similar enemies in the administration as well as in the PSC. Those seeking a genuine alternative to the university system’s disastrous reopening policies should not have one shred of confidence in the union’s charades.

Instead, they should join the growing movement of the working class to not only eradicate the pandemic, but also to raise basic living standards, defend democratic rights and end imperialist wars abroad. We urge CUNY students and staff who wish to advance this struggle to join the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, become involved in the New York City Educators Rank and File Safety Committee, and build the International Workers Alliance of Rank and File Safety Committees .



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