

As Biden announces new pandemic plan

New York Democrats reopen schools, order 280,000 city employees back to in-person work

Clare Hurley, Barry Grey
10 September 2021

In lockstep with President Joe Biden's moves to fully reopen the economy amid soaring COVID-19 infections and deaths, all of New York City's municipal workers have been ordered to report to their offices and work locations for in-person work on Monday morning.

This includes 75,000 public school teachers, who, along with 1,100,000 students, are being herded back Monday into unsafe, poorly ventilated school buildings where they will be crammed together, a situation that makes a mockery of Biden's claim that his new pandemic plan, announced Thursday, is motivated by a desire to "save lives" and protect children.

This takes place under conditions where COVID infections and hospitalizations of children are already soaring, and children are dying at the highest rate since the pandemic erupted at the beginning of 2020. School openings around the country have fueled a 500 percent rise in child infections over the past month, to the point where children account for nearly a quarter of all new infections nationwide. Already, scores of schools have been forced to close and temporarily shift back to remote learning due to eruptions of the pandemic among students, educators and staff. Teachers and staff are becoming infected and the death toll is rapidly rising.

The *New York Times* COVID tracker reported 170,460 new infections nationwide on Thursday, and a sharp increase in new deaths to 3,231—far greater than the recent average of about 1,300. New York City has already officially reported 34,000 deaths due to COVID.

In announcing mandatory vaccinations for federal employees and mandates for workers at private companies, Biden said that "the most important" part of his plan was to keep schools open, which he falsely claimed could be done safely. This has been a central demand of the ruling class under both Trump and Biden, as it is considered critical to getting parents back into unsafe workplaces.

The massive back-to-work drive in the country's largest city is being enforced by Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio. It shows

that the real purpose of Biden's plan is to reverse the slowdown in the economy caused by the Delta variant-driven new wave of the pandemic. This is to be accomplished by forcing workers back into offices, schools and factories to fully resume the flow of corporate profits, despite the inevitable cost in human lives.

It goes hand in hand with the termination of pandemic relief measures that have served as a lifeline for millions, including federal unemployment benefits and a ban on evictions. A 15 percent increase in food stamp benefits is set to expire at the end of this month.

The trade unions are playing a critical role in enforcing this homicidal policy. The teachers unions are backing the school reopenings, with American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten carrying out a nationwide tour to impose full in-person instruction. The AFL-CIO as a whole is playing the same role. In New York, the city unions are doing nothing to oppose the back-to-work drive, despite mounting concern and opposition among city workers.

As the *New York Times* noted in a front-page article Friday promoting the return to work in New York, "The move will be closely watched in cities around the nation." The *Times* acknowledged that the demand for in-person working is "sparking significant unrest among workers in New York City." It reported that it interviewed a dozen city employees and all but one disapproved of de Blasio's plan. It cited the local union chapter president for the Parks Department as saying he has been "inundated with concerns from his members."

In a separate front-page article headlined "Biden's New Vaccine Push Is a Fight for the US Economy," the *Times* acknowledged that the administration was driven to announce its new measures by the recent slowdown in economic growth due to the surge in the pandemic.

The ruling class was stunned by the dismal jobs report for August released September 3, which fell far below economists' predictions, registering only 235,000 new jobs, barely a quarter

of the new jobs created in each of the previous two months. Fears are mounting within the corporate-financial elite that the massively inflated stock market, pumped up by trillions of dollars from the Federal Reserve, will collapse unless workers are driven back onto assembly lines and into warehouses to back up the mountain of debt with real value extracted through sweat-shop exploitation.

Noting that Biden administration officials had made clear on Thursday the new vaccination mandate plan excluded any return to “lockdowns or shutdowns,” the *Times* wrote that “the surge in deaths crippled consumer confidence in August and portends a possible chill in fall spending...”

It complained that “there is little sign that would-be workers, even vaccinated ones, have become more accepting of the risks of returning to service jobs as the pandemic rages.”

Since the majority of the New York City workforce—firefighters, EMS, police, sanitation, health care workers—have continued to work in person throughout the pandemic, the back-to-work order primarily affects the 80,000 office employees who have worked remotely since the city was forced by the pandemic to shut down in March 2020.

In line with Biden’s mandated vaccination of federal workers, and in order to spur the lagging rate of vaccination in the city, all 280,000 city workers must show proof of full vaccination or submit a negative COVID test weekly when they report to work starting September 13.

Inside offices, elevators and stairwells, mask-wearing will be required all day, but no social distancing will be enforced in open office spaces, where work stations are often less than three feet apart. No remote or hybrid work schedules will be permitted. Failure to comply, without a Reasonable Accommodation from the Equal Opportunity Office, will result in termination.

The unilateral terms and less than two-weeks notice have left many of those most affected angry and resistant, as they are forced to rearrange child care, living arrangements and other obligations to resume their pre-pandemic schedules at the drop of a hat.

At the beginning of August, it was announced that city workers, like public school children and teachers, would be expected to return fully in-person without any remote option come September.

Given only “we’ll see” in answer to questions over the summer about what preparations were actually being made to implement a return to the office, workers were led to expect that some phased-in plan would be forthcoming. However, the back-to-work order issued on the day before the Labor Day weekend had nothing to do with a rational plan.

Wall Street and the real estate speculators are particularly concerned over low occupation rates in business districts across the city. Real estate interests that command astronomical rents in such high profile towers as the rebuilt One World Trade Center face a situation where more than 21 percent of office

space in Lower Manhattan is vacant, double the vacancy rate before the pandemic and an all-time high. A similar situation exists in the other primary business districts like midtown Manhattan.

This is what is driving the unsafe reopening of a city, the home of Wall Street and the world’s largest concentration of billionaires, where massive poverty, inequality and decaying infrastructure were brutally exposed earlier this month when the remnants of Hurricane Ida caused massive flooding that left 48 dead and hundreds homeless.

The response of District Council 37 and the rest of the city unions to the unsafe back-to-work drive is to file lawsuits against the mayor’s office for failing to include them in negotiations.

Biden’s new pandemic plan and de Blasio’s back-to-work drive are part of the same policy. It is the policy, either in the naked form of “herd immunity” or the more muted form of “mitigation” by means of vaccination and masking, that has been adopted by capitalist governments around the world. It is dictated not by science or concern for saving lives. Rather, it is dictated by the economic interests of the capitalist class, which rejects the only scientifically valid and effective strategy to fight the pandemic—a strategy to marshal vaccines and every other means to eliminate and eradicate the virus.

That requires the shutdown of all non-essential workplaces and schools, along with universal vaccination, universal testing, contact tracing and isolation of infected individuals, until the spread of the virus is halted. All the resources needed must be allocated to fully compensate workers impacted by shutdowns and provide high quality remote learning. The money must be requisitioned from the vast fortunes of the financial oligarchy, which has increased its wealth dramatically in the course of the pandemic, feasting off of mass death.

As the Socialist Equality Party explained in its statement of September 7, the only social force that can enforce the strategy of eradicating the virus is the working class. This requires the expansion of rank-and-file committees independent of the unions and both big business parties to fight for the immediate closure of schools and all non-essential workplaces in the US as part of an international movement.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact