

Behind the far-right, anti-vaccine demonstrations in New York City

Jesse Thomas
11 October 2021

On Monday, October 4, a right-wing demonstration was staged in New York City in opposition to the federal upholding of a citywide vaccine mandate covering approximately 150,000 Department of Education (DOE) workers. Several hundred people took part, marching five miles from the DOE headquarters in Downtown Brooklyn, across the Brooklyn Bridge to the Australian Consulate in midtown Manhattan.

The protest is part of a string of far-right demonstrations in the city which have been seized upon to legitimize unpopular anti-vaccination and anti-science policies. The *New York Times* has largely been silent on the local right-wing rallies, instead focusing on the narrative that anti-vaccination sentiments are primarily associated with other, more conservative states in the country.

The tabloid NYC news media on the other hand, particularly the *New York Post* of billionaire Rupert Murdoch, has aggressively attempted to present such protests as being representative of a mass movement in support of scrapping any and all life-saving measures against the pandemic, in the name of “freedom.” The purpose of this campaign is the further legitimization of anti-science and forcing the framework of political discourse toward the far right.

A video circulated on social media of the October 4 march showed protesters violently flipping over a pop-up tent belonging to a mobile COVID testing unit near Union Square. Surrounding crowds can be heard booing the marchers as a police officer is seen passively standing by the scene, preventing angry onlookers from intervening against the violent provocation. The far-right Tea Party posted several videos of the event on its organization’s website, which featured shots of police and fire officers saluting and clapping for the demonstrators as they marched by.

Unlike similar rallies since the summer, the October 4 event was explicitly organized in solidarity with far-right, anti-lockdown riots in Australia which began last month, and which have been heavily promoted by the Murdoch-owned press in his native country. The New York demonstrators

waved Australian and American flags, shouting slogans opposing vaccinations and lockdowns in the US and overseas.

The event was concurrent with a dramatic shift in pandemic policies of governments in Asian and Pacific countries such as Australia, New Zealand and Singapore away from rigorous containment and toward US-style “herd-immunity” practices. This recent change in the health policies of these nations is explainable by the tremendous pressure exerted by the US on its allies to fall in line with its demonization of China, paving the way ideologically for war.

There has been a legal battle against the implementation of vaccine mandates in the state of New York, with several lawsuits and actions being promoted to national attention. In all but a few instances, these were carried out by organizations closely associated with far-right and fascistic anti-lockdown, masking and vaccination groups within the orbit of the Republican Party on a local, state and national level.

The effect of the vaccine mandates, in both New York and across the country, however, has been to demonstrate the weakness and isolation of the reactionary, anti-science faction, which has little support within the working class.

By the September 27 deadline, 92 percent of New York state’s roughly 650,000 health care workers had received at least one dose of the vaccine. By Monday of last week, 96 percent of the nearly 150,000 DOE workers had similarly chosen to begin the process of inoculation. In California, the country’s most populous state, mandates have led to vaccination rates rising to over 90 percent in statewide health care facilities.

The legal assault against the DOE’s mandate was spearheaded by the right-wing law firm Fonte & Gelormino. Based in Staten Island, the firm has a history of working intimately with the minority Republican faction in New York City municipal politics, as well as the minority Republicans in the New York state legislature.

In 2020, the firm worked on a case which pushed for the

unsafe reopening of city restaurants to indoor, in-person dining. Fonte & Gelormino's website advertises itself as being on the "forefront of the fight against unconstitutional" vaccine and masking mandates. It is also currently leading a class action lawsuit against masking mandates in New York City, the country's largest school district.

A suit against New York state was filed last month contesting Governor Kathy Hochul's imposition of a vaccine mandate covering health care workers throughout the state. The plaintiffs, all Catholic and Baptist health care professionals, were represented by attorneys from the Thomas More Society, a far-right organization which was actively involved the Trump's fascist "Stop the Steal" campaign. The group has been embroiled in litigation against abortion and same-sex marriage rights since the late 1990s.

A lawsuit was also filed against Hochul by We the Patriots, USA, a far-right group which claims to advocate for "religious freedoms," "medical freedoms," "parental rights," "educational freedom," Second Amendment rights and "free enterprise capitalism, unencumbered by regulation." The maneuver similarly challenged the vaccination mandates on religious grounds.

Another lawsuit against the New York State Department of Health, Public Health and Health Planning Council was filed by New York's District 147 Republican Assemblyman David J. DiPietro, along with a host of fanatical, anti-vaccination pundits and advocates of "medical freedom."

While all these lawsuits claim to defend individual freedom against state compulsion, they are in reality defending the "right" to contract a deadly virus and pass it on to children, family members, co-workers and the general public. There is no such right, either in law or in the Constitution.

Whereas in most of these cases, legal arguments against mandates centered on religious rights, a case brought against the court system of New York state by the Civil Service Employees Association Local 1000 union (CSEA), the flagship chapter of the union covering approximately 5,600 state employees, made the argument that the mandates impinged upon the union's right to collective bargaining. Significantly, the presiding judge ruled in favor of the plaintiffs and declared that mandates could not be enforced on the state court workers.

The CSEA v. NY ruling is in line with the sharp shift by the bankrupt trade union apparatus toward far-right and fascist "herd-immunity" politics in the past several weeks. On September 30, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) held an online town hall which gave free rein the far-right Open Parents USA group and proponents of the Great Barrington Declaration to promote murderous, anti-vaccine,

anti-masking pseudoscience. Michael Mulgrew, president of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), the labor union covering all NYC DOE teachers, has openly opposed the implementation of life-saving vaccine mandates.

The October 4 demonstration must be seen within the context of the political crisis of the American ruling class, which is desperate to control domestic opposition to its homicidal "back-to-work" and "back-to-school" policies. Both the openly fascist wing of the corporate elite, and the Democratic Party-aligned faction, seek to block any discussion of a serious effort to eradicate the coronavirus.

But confining all discussion of the pandemic within the framework of limited mitigation efforts vs. doing nothing to stop the spread of the virus helps promote fascist and far-right ideologies which view the destruction of hundreds of thousands of lives through illness as secondary to individual and property rights.

The focus on Australia in last Monday's rally was telling. It came only a few weeks after the Biden administration announced the formation of an anti-China military alliance linking Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States. Murdoch and other billionaires who back the anti-mandate protests view the life-saving measures undertaken in China as dangerous, not only in demonstrating to the world that the virus can be stopped cold, but in undermining the rapacious drive of American imperialism to dominate the world at the expense of international rivals, above all in China.

The global working class must fight for the immediate implementation of rational, scientifically based health policies which will save lives and eradicate the pandemic. This struggle is implacably bound with the fight for the betterment of wages, living standards, and vital social infrastructure not only in the US, but internationally.

All those interested in joining this fight should attend the NYC Educator's Rank and File Safety Committee October 16 meeting at 3:30 p.m., become involved in the International Youth and Students for Social Equality in New York, and register for the WSWS's international online event, "How to end the pandemic: The case for eradication," scheduled for Sunday, October 24 at 1 p.m. Eastern Time.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact