Latest barrage of anti-vaccine protests in New York City aimed at building a far-right movement

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Over the past several days, New York City has seen a string of right-wing demonstrations opposing vaccines, vaccine mandates and mitigation measures against the coronavirus pandemic.

These events have been organized around slogans such as "individual choice," "medical freedom," "personal liberty" and "religious rights."

The organizers of these protests have sought to portray them as the expression of a popular movement with broad support. In actuality, the wave of protests is backed by elements within the highest levels of the state, with support from the trade union bureaucracies, disaffected middle class layers and certain disoriented and destitute elements of the working class.

On Thursday, a protest at Gracie Mansion, the official residence of the mayor, located at 88th Street and East End Avenue in Manhattan, was sponsored by the Uniformed Firefighters Association (UFA), which represents approximately 9,000 active firefighters. Local news reports indicated that "thousands" of firefighters were present.

UFA President Andrew Ansbro denounced a vaccine mandate for all municipal workers recently implemented by Mayor Bill de Blasio. The mandate, which took effect Friday evening, requires all city employees to receive at least one dose of the vaccine or be sent home without pay.

Citing major New York Fire Department (FDNY) personnel shortages, with up to 45 percent, or 3,500, of New York City firefighters remaining unvaccinated, Ansbro spoke to Fox News and called the mandate "immoral." He said, "there's just not the manpower and the staffing…We're just not going to be able to get to emergencies on time."

Participants at the protest carried signs with slogans likening mandates to government "tyranny," some featuring anti-communist symbols. There were also flags with variations on the Revolutionary War-era "Don't Tread On Me" image of a curled snake in front of a yellow background, as well as signs bearing citations from the US Constitution.

Ansbro is publicly supporting the Republican candidate in this year's New York mayoral election, Curtis Sliwa, who was present at Thursday's protest. Sliwa founded the paramilitary vigilante group Guardian Angels in New York City in the 1970s. The group was later endorsed by the fascist Rudy Giuliani and the billionaire Michael Bloomberg, both former mayors of New York.

Ansbro has publicly called for FDNY employees to defy De Blasio's mandate and report for duty even if they are not in compliance.

Jim McCarthy of the Uniformed Fire Officers Association (UFOA), the union representing high-ranking FDNY officials, spoke on Fox News following Thursday's protest, denouncing the vaccine mandates.

The Thursday demonstration followed a march on Monday, October 25 from downtown Brooklyn to City Hall in Manhattan protesting the vaccination mandate. The event was sponsored by the New York City Police Benevolent Association (PBA), the union representing approximately 24,000 New York City Police Department (NYPD) officers. Hundreds of cops were joined by firefighters, sanitation workers and other city employees. Sliwa was present at the demonstration and spoke to local news media during the event.

A Bloomberg News article stated that roughly 10,000 of the city's 35,000 police officers remain unvaccinated. Across the US, police have been among the most resistant to being vaccinated.

The PBA has filed a lawsuit against the De Blasio administration with the Staten Island Supreme Court. The argument being made by the Manhattan firm representing the PBA, Golenbock Eisman Assor Bell & Peskoe, LLP, is that the mandate infringes on the autonomy of the NYPD, under conditions where COVID-19 testing has supposedly provided sufficient mitigation of the virus. The presiding Judge, Lizette Colon, has ruled against a restraining order that would have prevented Friday's mandate from taking effect.

Pat Lynch, the president of the New York PBA, has been an outspoken champion of the "rights" of the police, including the "right" to use indiscriminate force, intimidate people and conduct searches without a warrant. He has defended the officers who murdered Eric Garner and supported the hated "Stop-and-Frisk" policy. Lynch and the PBA endorsed Donald Trump's 2020 presidential campaign.

On Sunday, October 24, an anti-vaccination rally was held in support of benched Brooklyn Nets National Basketball Association (NBA) player Kyrie Irving. Irving refused to comply with the state's vaccine mandate on professional athletes and has been suspended by the league for his noncompliance. In addition to being an outspoken opponent of vaccination, Irving has also

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publicly flirted with deep-state conspiracy theories as well as the belief that the earth is flat.

The October 24 rally, which attracted some 500 participants, began at Commodore Barry Park and ended at the Barclay's Center, the home stadium of the Nets. Anti-vaccination signs proclaimed, "Stand with Kyrie," "We Will NOT Comply," and "Nazi passports," referring to mandates that require documentation of vaccination.

The racially mixed crowd waved US flags and yellow "Don't Tread on Me" flags, as well as "African American flags." The latter was designed by artist David Hammons in the 1990s, and features the red, green and black colors associated with Marcus Garvey's back to Africa Movement. Several of the Brooklyn protesters were seen wearing Black Lives Matter shirts.

Fox News named John Matland as one of the organizers of the Brooklyn rally. According to interviews in the right-wing *National Review*, Matland is a former medical worker who allowed himself to be fired rather than receive the COVID vaccine when it was required by law.

Matland, who is from Staten Island, campaigned against vaccine mandates at his former workplace and more broadly. He has won the public support of a group of Staten Island restauranteurs who have been engaged in a battle against the New York City government over COVID-related shutdowns since 2020. The group and its periphery have been heavily oriented toward New York minority Republican legislators at the city, state and federal levels.

The site PoliticusUSA, a small news organization of formerly mainstream journalists that touts its independence from the corporate media, published a report on the Brooklyn protest in which it said, "[T]he Trumpers have merged with the far-left [Robert F. Kennedy Jr.] anti-vaxxers to push a toxic blend of lies and misinformation about the COVID vaccine."

Although the article did not provide evidence that Kennedy was directly involved in the Barclays Center protest, a march in Times Square on October 16 was organized by Children's Health Defense (CHD), a viciously anti-vaccine organization of which Kennedy is the founder and chairman. The protest, entitled "Broadway Rally for Freedom," brandished anticommunist and anti-vaccination flags and shouted slogans, including "My body, my choice," and "Equal rights for vaxxed and unvaxxed." Approximately 1,000 demonstrators marched on Broadway between 41st and 42nd street.

Kennedy is son of the late Democratic Senator Robert F. Kennedy, who was assassinated in 1968. He has been heavily involved in national Democratic Party politics for some time, although he has never held office or occupied a government position. Kennedy was in several discussions with ex-President Donald Trump at the dawn of the latter's presidency over his taking the position of chairman of the Vaccine Safety Task Force.

These demonstrations have taken place amidst a sharp shift to the right by the trade union bureaucracies. On September 30, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the second-largest teacher's union in the country, held an online town hall meeting that gave a platform to two prominent signatories of the Great Barrington declaration, a manifesto for the deadly "herd immunity" policy. In New York, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) has joined the chorus opposing De Blasio's mandates only to find itself in the camp of the PBA and the political right.

It is critical that the working class stand for the defense of science against attacks by both wings of the ruling establishment and its agents within the police, the unions and the state. It is a matter of life and death that workers develop their own independent political program, based on science and scientific truth, for the saving of lives and the elimination of the pandemic.

On October 24, the WSWS sponsored an international webinar that hosted a panel of scientists who spoke on the science behind the global pandemic and its effects on the public. While it is abundantly clear that vaccines are an indispensable tool for saving lives, the WSWS opposes the claims of the political and media establishment that vaccines by themselves are sufficient to contain the virus and obviate the need for extensive public health measures, such as lockdowns of schools and non-essential workplaces. Vaccine mandates can serve to minimize infections and save lives only as part of a science-based, internationally coordinated drive to eliminate and eventually eradicate the virus.

The Biden administration and the Democrats nationally and locally, like virtually all capitalist governments internationally, oppose a policy of elimination and are ending whatever remains of mitigation measures in line with the demands of corporate profit. The result of this policy, which has already cost over 5 million lives internationally, according to official figures, and over 750,000 in the US, will, if not reversed, be millions of more needless deaths, plus the long-term health consequences of Long COVID.

The WSWS calls for the urgent mobilization of every health measure to stop the spread of the coronavirus and its deadly effects. Vaccination efforts must be combined with the closure of all non-essential institutions and the provision of resources to all families affected in order to eliminate the pandemic on a global scale. We urge workers to join this struggle by building the International Workers' Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees in New York City and beyond.

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