Head of New York City ambulance union goes on anti-COVID-19 vaccine crusade

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Prior to last month's implementation of a COVID-19 vaccine mandate for New York City municipal workers, many of the city's most prominent union figures emerged as belligerent opponents of vaccines and other critical public safety measures.

As the October 29 deadline approached, many of the unions, including those covering workers from the New York Police Department (NYPD), the Fire Department of New York (FDNY) and Department of Sanitation (DSNY), were engaged in a frenzied campaign of lawsuits, right-wing rallies and hysterical fear mongering threatening mass resignations and disruptions to essential government services. The trade unions have generally attempted to misrepresent the issue of vaccination requirements—long recognized as an elementary public health measure already required for other viruses among school-age children—as an infringement on "personal choice" and "medical autonomy," to be negotiated at the "bargaining table."

Oren Barzilay, the president of the city's Emergency Medical Service union, Local 2507 of the AFSCME public workers union, distinguished himself by promoting vaccine skepticism and COVID-19 conspiracy theories.

In comments to the press, Barzilay insisted, "[y]ou'll have police officers walking off—firefighters, EMTs and paramedics walking off. Who's going to respond to these calls? … We are in for dark days in our city, and it's crazy."

Barzilay has also spread lies about the safety of the vaccine, claiming that two EMS workers had died within four days of being vaccinated and that there had "not been enough research done to determine if this is safe or not." When asked to identify the EMS workers whose deaths he attributed to the vaccine, he declined, citing confidentiality.

The FDNY, which runs the city's municipal EMS department, was compelled to issue a statement dispelling his allegations in which it clarified that there were "no confirmed deaths related to the COVID-19 vaccine."

Undeterred, Barzilay later made the rounds at a local news station and Fox News, where he suggested a vast government conspiracy that was hiding that one percent of all vaccinated individuals were dying from the vaccine.

Upon facing sharp rebukes in the media for his lies and fearmongering, Barzilay reverted to the worn out rhetoric of protecting "personal liberty." "We are not in any way anti-vax, but pro-choice, … [o]ur role is to advocate for our membership who are on the front lines. The union advocates for the health and safety of eight million New Yorkers, but why can't we advocate for ourselves too?"

In fact, Barzilay is not advocating on behalf of EMS workers but endangering them. EMS workers are on the front lines of the pandemic and interact with members of the public who are infected or exposed every day. Moreover, by using his position to falsely pose as a spokesman for a critical and highly visible section of the health care workforce, he is endangering the public at large by spreading lies and promoting all forms of social and ideological backwardness, which will result in further tragic loss of life.

Any genuine workers' leader, particularly a leader of health care workers, would consider it an elementary duty to educate the public about the dangers posed by the pandemic, particularly as a new winter surge is underway and what can be done to stop it. Moreover, he or she would fight to expose the reckless and criminal subordination of public health measures by Wall Street and the corporate-controlled governments

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to profit and fight to mobilize workers for a strategy of elimination, combining measures such as lockdowns with full compensation, contact tracing, vaccinations, masks and others in order to end the pandemic once and for all.

Barzilay does none of this because he is not a workers' leader but an ignorant bureaucrat who promotes backwardness as a line of defense for the wealthy against the danger of a movement from below. He goads those EMS workers naive enough to believe him into losing income and potentially their jobs while remaining exposed to a lethal disease that has, in contrast to vaccines, already killed several EMS workers in the city.

Despite his ominous predictions, vaccine mandates, as a piece of public health policy, have proven hugely successful wherever implemented. In NYC, as of this writing, the vast majority of EMS workers have now been vaccinated, with an unfortunate, small minority of holdouts suffering loss of income and potentially their jobs, which is a hardship Barzilay and other union bureaucrats will not experience.

This shameful episode is only the latest in a litany of betrayals that EMS workers have suffered at the hands of the union.

Only three months ago, the union ratified a sellout contract that stripped away the right to the eight-hour workday and imposed multi-tiered health care coverage. The union passed the contract by inflating and misrepresenting the actual figures and by denying workers the right to read the contract.

Barzilay's ranting is not just the byproduct of the brain of one deranged individual but is part of the pro-capitalist orientation of the trade unions over the course of decades. Their hatred of the class struggle, which threatens their own corrupt relations with management which is the basis for their exorbitant six-figure salaries, cultivates among these layers not only extreme levels of ignorance but an affinity towards extreme right positions. Long before Trump began demanding the construction of a wall separating the United States from Mexico, the unions had already made scapegoating foreign workers as the cause of job losses in the United States their stock-in-trade. Almost immediately after his victory in the 2016 election, they declared their support for his "America First" policies.

Barzilay is not the only union official to promote open COVID-19 skepticism. American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten, a highly-connected political operator in the Democratic Party who makes $500,000 a year, recently held an online town hall in which she allowed representatives from right-wing parents groups and quack doctors to attack the efficacy of wearing masks. While Weingarten attempted to distance herself during the meeting, she revealed she had been secretly in contact with these same groups for months as part of her campaign to beat back the opposition of teachers to school re-openings.

Workers must draw the decisive lessons and break with these organizations. The interests of EMS and health care workers, along with the rest of the working class, lie in scientifically guided public health care policies to eliminate the COVID-19 pandemic, which have been blocked by the profit motive of the ruling class, who have promoted all forms of social backwardness as an ideological smokescreen. The way forward lies in the independent mobilization of the working class, in opposition to the treachery of the unions, to fight for an elimination strategy.

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