

New York City reinforces vaccine-only approach to the pandemic

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8 December 2021

On Monday, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio announced an expansion of the city's vaccine mandate policies while dismissing outright any aggressive public health measures to suppress the latest surge of COVID-19.

On December 27, the city will require all employees working in-person at private establishments to be vaccinated. The de Blasio administration has already implemented rules covering vaccines for its 325,000 municipal employees, along with workers and patrons at bars, restaurants, gyms, and entertainment venues.

While the expanded requirements position New York City's vaccine program among the most aggressive in the country, by themselves they are grossly insufficient to stop the pandemic from once again engulfing New York City and beyond. Indeed, despite vaccination rates that approach 90 percent for adults, the city is experiencing a rapid increase in cases and hospitalizations.

While most of the current cases are tied to the Delta variant, the emergence of Omicron further exposes the bankruptcy of a strategy that relies almost exclusively on vaccines. The explosion of Omicron-linked cases in South Africa provides worrying indications that the variant may evade existing immunity. Scientists are monitoring the situation in South Africa and elsewhere to understand the extent to which the current vaccines remain effective.

Omicron has already appeared in dozens of countries worldwide, including the United States. Health officials have identified several local cases and postulated that the new variant is already spreading in New York.

The first Omicron case in the US not linked to international travel was a vaccinated Minnesota man who attended an anime convention in New York City. An estimated 50,000 people joined him at the event in

the Javits Center in Midtown Manhattan, which from 2020 through the summer of this year functioned as a field hospital, then a mass vaccination site. Now the expanded convention center is fully open and holding mass events.

Rather than vaccine mandates making up part of a comprehensive strategy aimed at eliminating the spread of the pandemic, de Blasio's vaccine push takes the place of measures like remote schooling, workplace closures, and restrictions on large gatherings. They build on the mayor's reopening of schools in September and his requirement for all city employees to return to office buildings.

At a press conference Monday, De Blasio emphasized that the mandate is intended to substitute for policies that actually break the chain of transmission. He noted with contempt the renewed lockdowns in Germany, saying, "We cannot let those restrictions come back. We cannot have shutdowns here in New York City."

Underscoring his singular focus on vaccines, de Blasio also announced that vaccine requirements would expand to cover indoor dining for children and extracurricular activities at private schools. COVID vaccines, however, are not required for in-person schooling, setting up a situation where the city deems it safe for unvaccinated students to mingle indoors with hundreds of their schoolmates and staff all day long, but unsafe once the school bell rings.

The actions of de Blasio match the strategy implemented by the Democratic Party nationally. President Biden responded to the emergence of Omicron by downplaying the threat and promoting vaccine boosters as the antidote. Meanwhile, he insisted that workplaces and schools must remain open. With callous indifference to the population's health, Biden stressed that students must stay in school even if

exposed to the virus. He deceitfully suggested that testing, which can't uncover cases until days after transmission becomes possible, is an adequate substitute for quarantine.

These reckless policies will ensure that the pandemic continues to spread and that hundreds of thousands more in the US alone will die in the coming months. At the national and local levels, the rejection of school and workplace closures reflects the needs of the ruling class to keep profits flowing, whatever the death toll.

Nonetheless, the vaccine mandates have triggered a significant opposition, spearheaded by right-wing and fascistic forces. The order will likely face legal challenges, similar to the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration mandate for companies with more than 100 employees that is currently tied up in the courts.

Press reports have highlighted the response of business owners in New York City who fear the policy will further hamper their ability to hire and retain employees. The nationwide labor shortage is acutely felt in New York City, where workers have quit in record numbers, unwilling to continue to risk their lives in miserable jobs for unlivable wages and few benefits.

Corporate leaders, such as Kathryn Wylde of the business association Partnership for New York City, also complained that they were "blindsided," that is, not given veto authority ahead of the announcement.

De Blasio's earlier vaccine mandates also drew opposition from the city's municipal unions, which participated alongside the far-right in demonstrations earlier this fall. The unions have promoted right-wing arguments that vaccination should be a matter of individual choice, ignoring the fact that transmission of the virus affects the entire society and can only be addressed on a social basis.

While the vast majority of workers in the city have received the jab, the slow uptake and remaining pockets of resistance within the working class reflect a complete lack of authority on the part of the mayor and the institutions of the ruling class. Workers know through bitter experience the government functions for Wall Street and the corporate elite. The working class is treated as expendable, left struggling to afford housing, health care, and other basic necessities.

The pleadings by de Blasio and other political representatives of big business are treated with

skepticism, if not outright hostility. After all, it was de Blasio, echoing the political establishment in Albany and Washington, who told New Yorkers at the onset of the pandemic that everything was under control, to go about their everyday business and "get out on the town."

The lame-duck mayor will hand off implementation of the new mandate to Eric Adams, who takes office on January 1. Adams, who is currently vacationing overseas, has not commented directly on the expanded requirements. However, during his mayoral campaign, he pledged to continue the current policy in all its essentials, pushing vaccination while rejecting any measures that threaten the flow of profits to his constituents in big business.



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