As COVID-19 cases skyrocket in New York City, schools, offices remain open

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The residents of New York City are now once more in the grip of mass infection from COVID-19, in a situation comparable only to the first wave of the pandemic in the spring of 2020. Yesterday there were 143 new hospitalizations and 4,561 new cases diagnosed. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, approximately 13 percent of cases have been identified as the highly infectious Omicron variant of the coronavirus.

On Friday, statewide, over 21,000 people were confirmed infected with the virus, the highest daily count since the beginning of the pandemic was first detected in the state in March 2020. Democratic Governor Kathy Hochul, however, refused to issue any lockdown orders. She tweeted, "We can't—and we won't—go back to where we were 21 months ago."

The COVID-19 test positivity rate in the city has nearly doubled in ten days from 3.91 percent on December 9 to 7.3 percent on December 12, an unprecedented leap. "We've never seen this before," remarked Dr. Jay Varma, a senior health adviser to the city's Democratic mayor, Bill de Blasio. "The data that we monitor so closely is showing an alarming trend," the city's Health Commissioner, Dr. Dave Chokshi, reported in a statement.

On Wednesday, 8,318 people in the city had a positive COVID-19 lab or rapid test, according to New York State's Department of Health. This is an increase from 5,084 on Tuesday and 3,124 on Monday.

The record-breaking surge has caught the city authorities and businesses completely unprepared.

Major Broadway shows such as *Hamilton*, *Tina - The Tina Turner Musical*, *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, and *Ain't Too Proud* all canceled performances, but only after some cast and crew tested positive for COVID-19. A performance of *Moulin Rouge!* was abruptly canceled on Thursday night as the audience was taking their seats because of a positive test for a cast member.

Many restaurants have temporarily closed and final exams at Columbia University and New York University have moved online, following the example of Cornell earlier this week. The Metropolitan Opera will require a third booster shot from performers, staff and audiences, but only after January 17.

Testing centers have long lines and long waits. According to the online journal, *The City*, at least 20 of 55 testing sites run by the city's Health + Hospitals were closed after Thanksgiving. Maximum wait time has grown from seven minutes in mid-November to 30 minutes this week with a number of these testing facilities averaging waits of 1.5 hours or more.

The situation is particularly dire for children. Four schools as of Friday have been closed and 859 classrooms are closed, up from 153 last month, over a fourfold increase. Fifty charter school classrooms are closed as well. There are also 2,499 partial classroom quarantines (143 in charter schools) as well as 21 investigations (one in charters). These figures barely reflect the actual gravity of the situation, since the highly inadequate testing regime used by the Department of Education (DOE) to keep schools open catches only about 14 percent of COVID-19 cases in school-aged children.

In fact, according to independent data reported from labs, the number of cases in children 11– 17 has doubled from December 12 to December 15 from 502 cases to 1,085 cases. The parents' advocacy group, PRESS NYC, has noted that 43 children with COVID-19 diagnoses in the city have been admitted to hospitals this week.

The DOE acted quickly on Thursday night to quash a rumor circulating among educators and parents that the school system would shut down for in-person learning—the only sensible response to the rapid rise in infections among children—releasing a memo to principals saying, "there is no imminent plan or intent to transition to remote learning system-wide. All temporary classroom and schoolwide closures due to widespread transmission within a school are decided by the Situation Room on a case-by-case basis."

When asked by WNYC's Brian Lehrer if schools would close, Mayor de Blasio responded, "No, no, no!" and indicated that the city is in a totally different situation than March 2020, given vaccinations. He told Lehrer that shutting down schools and city would be "traumatizing."

Michael Mulgrew, the president of the United Federation of Teachers, also ruled out any school closure. In a letter to educators, he called for vaccination and half-hearted measures, such as "pressing the DOE to work to increase the opt-in rate for student testing."

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The motto of the authorities is: Do nothing until it is too late.

Nevertheless, reports from parents and teachers about the trauma of keeping schools open during a deadly pandemic, which have kept rolling in from Twitter and other social media in the last few days, give a sense of the extent of the rapidity of the spread of the virus in school.

One read, "Confirmed cases (including our principal, multiple admin and office staff) and close to 900 students quarantined. There are an additional 7 staff out with symptoms but awaiting test results."

"I was a close contact from a COVID positive co-worker," said a teacher. "And [I] only know that because they called me. Nothing from test and trace or Principal. This is how to have a major outbreak in schools."

Another teacher: "Another covid case in my school. No surprise. But what was surprising was that when the child went to the nurse and had a fever, she sent him back to class to sit with the kids until the parents picked him up. Admin says there's no isolation protocol … do parents know?"

Indeed, the DOE is suppressing information on the outbreak to parents, educators and students alike. One Brooklyn educator on Twitter caught the sense of fear that the DOE is instilling in school buildings:

"Today, out of 15 rooms I know of 8 classes have "disappeared." The rooms are dark, silent and without the buzz of life. Staff once occupying them are all gone without a word. Kids too, home I presume. But idk because nobody will tell us. We just guess that's where they are. Teachers ask admins who is Q'tined? BUT admins aren't allowed to answer. But we all can guess unofficially who is QUARANTINED b/c there is talk among teachers …

"So now panicked parents are calling daily to find out the truth but we can't provide any answers because we're not allowed to. So now parents are pulling their kids out of the school building b/c other parents & kids talk to each other & find out the truth.

"And yes, we have plenty of vax'd staff getting #Covid_19. Even after 2x booster shots … The fear of the sickness among staff & students hasn't been at this fever pitch since March 2020, when we had staff die … None of us know what next week will bring - who will get sick and 'disappear' without a word. But one thing's for certain, no matter who gets it next, the mayor will proudly decree that we schools stayed open."

Outrage at the continued opening of schools and nonessential businesses can be found everywhere. One parent tweeted: "We need to close schools NOW BEFORE THE HOLIDAYS to prevent mass infection. It's only common sense USE IT! #RESTOREREMOTE."

Workers are also taking their safety into their own hands. On Thursday, as one worker related to the WSWS, several crew members on the set of a TV production studio in the city tested positive for COVID-19 during the day. When these workers were removed from the set, the rest of the crew began asking questions about potential exposure. After a company health and safety manager refused to answer specific questions, one worker asked for a show of hands from all those who felt safe continuing working. No one raised his or her hand.

Management cut scheduled work for the next day in half and pushed back start time. Many workers called for an end of production for the rest of the year instead of going back at all.

As production began on Friday afternoon, some of the crew overheard a producer talking about the unsafe COVID-19 situation in the city, which contradicted earlier management claims about the viability of continuing work in a safe manner.

Workers again raised concerns including, this time, questions about contact tracing and unfulfilled promises of personal protective equipment. When no answers were forthcoming, about 60 workers temporarily walked out and several workers left for the day. Production resumed at a slow rate.

A social crime is unfolding in New York City and around the world as the Omicron variant spreads. The limited mitigation strategy of the Democrats is converging with the herd immunity program of the far right. De Blasio, Hochul and the unions, in line with the vaccine-only policy of the Biden administration, are lining up to ensure that the economy remains open and to protect the profits of the very rich even as infections surge to new heights and hospitals, already stretched to the breaking point, are being totally overwhelmed.

The working class must put forward its own program to eliminate the COVID virus and bring transmission of the disease down to zero. This means that workers must build rank-and-file committees that will enforce temporary lockdowns, demand income for those forced to stay home, implement a mass vaccination program, mass testing and contact tracing and temporary quarantine for infected people. Workers need to unite with the most socially conscious scientists to enact this program and to educate millions in the science of the pandemic.

At the heart of developing such a program and new organizations of struggle is the need to expose the official lies of the Democratic and Republican politicians, the union leaders and the corporate media about the pandemic. This is the purpose of the Global Workers' Inquest into the COVID 19 Pandemic, initiated by the *World Socialist Web Site*. The New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee will be leading a forum on the Inquest on Sunday afternoon. All workers, educators, parents and students are encouraged to attend.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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