“We must take matters into our own hands.”

Anger mounts as New York Democrats fail to protect population from Omicron surge

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New York City continues to register record numbers of infections from COVID-19 every day. On Thursday, New York state reported 38,835 positive cases, 22,808 of them in the city, an increase of over 400 percent from two weeks ago, with a positivity rate of over 12 percent. Do-it-yourself tests, purchased at a store or supplied by a government agency, do not count in this figure. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 92 percent of cases in the city are from the Omicron variant of the virus.

Counties in the city’s suburban areas are also seeing steep increases: Essex County in New Jersey, which includes the state’s largest city, Newark, has seen an increase of 359 percent; Westchester, to the north, 198 percent, Nassau on Long Island, 160 percent.

One physician, Jorge A. Caballero, noted on Twitter that over 1 percent of the population of the city has tested positive in the last week. Hundreds of thousands more are doubtlessly ill or asymptomatic and have not been tested. Many remain in school and at workplaces. Caballero also observed that, according to CDC figures, the number of children admitted to hospitals in New York City is at an all-time high.

The sudden rapid spread of COVID-19 cases has sparked a medical and social crisis.

Working people are finding that lines for testing remain long and that they must wait for hours. While the city has hastily opened more testing centers, after beginning to close them down following the Thanksgiving holiday, one leading test provider, CityMD, has closed 13 of its sites. Test kits in the city and suburbs in a 50-mile radius sell out as soon as they are put on shelves.

One worker told the WSWS: “Lines of people at the cv19 test tents on the streets that I saw in Jackson Heights and Astoria [neighborhoods in Queens] today were massive. No doubt many will forgo testing rather than wait hours on line.”

When the city’s Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio announced on Thursday that 10,000 kits would be distributed at just five locations in the city, New Yorkers reacted with disgust, particularly at the proposal to bring crowds of people together to receive the tests. “One location per borough! Crowding at each location to get in line for 2,000 kits which will be gone in minutes? Great!” said one person on Twitter.

The city’s subways remain some of the main vectors of virus transmission and are now threatened with further cuts in service as workers get sick. According to data obtained by the online journal *The City* from the state-run Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), which operates rapid transit in the city, “169 subway workers reported testing positive for COVID over the seven days ending Dec. 16.”

Business and entertainment venues continue to close. The New York City Ballet canceled performances of *The Nutcracker* until December 27 at Lincoln Center because of several vaccine-breakthrough positive test results for COVID-19 infections among production staff.

The public NYC Health + Hospitals, which runs 11 hospitals in the city, has stopped allowing patient visits because of the spread of COVID inside its facilities.

Chaos reigns in the school system, the largest in the United States. For nearly four months the city’s Department of Education (DOE) has tested only a fraction of its students and virtually none of its staff. With the difficulty of obtaining a test elsewhere in the city, the DOE allowed testing of some staff on Thursday.

One educator in Brooklyn described her experience at her school to the WSWS:

“We were turned away because we need to put in consent forms three days in advance. What form? Where? We are adults. We consent! We went to the union rep. He said the consent forms are on the DOE daily screening page, but the link is not working. They have made it impossible for us to get tested. How can we request a test three days in advance when we don’t know what day they are coming to test? The DOE is making it impossible for staff to test!”

Twelve schools and 421 individual classrooms have been closed by the DOE because of infections. But these actions only barely reflect the state of the crisis. The DOE’s situation room, which decides when to close schools, according to criteria that have never been published, has virtually stopped functioning. Calls are not answered, and messages go unreturned. Teachers have gone to school this week not knowing which of their classes will be held or which of their colleagues are sick.

By official estimates, over 24 percent of students are absent, but this includes students who are working remotely where schools allow it. Many teachers on the ground report much higher figures at their schools. All indications are that a mass boycott of schools by parents is emerging again, as it did after March 2020 and for

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most of the period until September this year.

One educator on Twitter reports, “The number of people I work with getting positive COVID tests is wild. Was 5 officially now more. Still omw to school this morning. @NYCSchools and @NYCMayor did this. And the toothless @uft is complicit. I don’t believe Mulgrew’s city-vetted email about COVID safety one bit.”

The Brooklyn teacher quoted above described her school: “Things are a mess! So many teachers are out. The kids most of the school day are warehoused in the auditorium, several classes at a time because there’s no one to cover classes.”

The city and state Democratic Party doubled down on the refusal to shut the school system—which begins winter break Friday. While the state’s Democratic governor, Kathy Hochul, canceled the statewide regents exams for high school seniors, she reiterated this week, “Our goal is to not let anything shut down,” and stuck to the vaccination-only policy of the Biden administration.

The governor announced the distribution of over two million test kits statewide this week, but implemented the notorious Test-to-Stay policy for schools, in which children who test negative and are asymptomatic must return to school without quarantine, to face infection again.

Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio announced on Thursday that the New Year’s Eve celebration in Times Square will be limited to “only” 15,000 people. One cannot imagine a more criminal act during a fast-spreading pandemic.

The incoming Mayor, Democrat Eric Adams, the former police officer who has overwhelming support from the very, very wealthy in New York, said in an interview with MSNBC this week, “COVID is becoming part of our normality. Do we shut down every time we have a new variant?” Adams reluctantly canceled his large, in-person inauguration ceremony.

Nevertheless, the *New YorkTimes* displayed anxiety about the ability to keep the schools open. Eliza Shapiro, a writer for the *Times* much despised, especially by New York City educators, for her role in advocating for the opening of schools, wrote:

“At the moment, no major political leader appears interested in employing some of the blunter tools used during previous surges. Public health officials credit widespread closings with saving lives, but the measures inflicted serious economic harm from which the state is still recovering, strained parents’ nerves and stirred a political backlash that helped Republicans win elections in territory typically friendly to Democrats.”

The *Times* is right to be concerned. A general mood of anger at the political establishment pervades the city. Opposition to the conduct of the city government in keeping schools open is particularly fierce among educators, and also at the union, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), for being complicit.

Michael Mulgrew, president of the UFT, suggested to Adams on Wednesday that the union might change its support for keeping schools open if in-school testing was not increased. This of course is blather. Mulgrew has followed the Democrats every step of the way since March 2020 in opening schools and eliminating any conditions at all under which they could be closed.

In August 2020, he agreed to close schools when the positivity rate reached 3 percent. He quickly discarded this number. The positivity rate is now over 12 percent. His remark, however, does serve as a warning to Adams that the UFT can easily lose control of the situation.

One group of teachers, organized by an opposition group in the UFT, the Movement of Rank-and-File Educators, (MORE) has been holding protests at several schools in the city. According to its website, its supporters at one school “began to organize a sickout to protest the unsafe working conditions and lack of testing. The school then switched to remote for December 23.”

While no opposition faction of the UFT has called for a strike, one leader of MORE, closely associated with the Democratic Socialists of America, has suggested that educators not return to work after the winter break, and proposed a system-wide sickout.

A comment on Twitter by the education blogger Jen Jennings, who has supplied educators and the public with accurate statistical information about the pandemic and insight into their meaning for months, deserves to be quoted. It sums up how many New Yorkers and especially educators feel right now:

“History will judge policymakers who sacrificed children’s health on the altar of the economy & their own political ambition, and those complicit.”

One heartfelt video by a teacher posted on Twitter said, “We send dozens of kids home, really sick, with high fevers. Mr. Mayor … you insisted these kids had to be in school. And UFT, wherever you are, because you are absent from this whole situation, *it didn’t have to be like this*. We could have done better for our kids … hopefully things change with a new administration. And if it doesn’t, we need to take matters into our own hands.”

The New York City Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee met on Sunday to discuss the meaning of “taking matters into our own hands.” After a vibrant discussion that included opposition by substitute and full-time teachers to the policies of the city and the UFT, as well as a statement from a parent who is being victimized by the city for keeping her children out of school, the meeting passed a resolution in support of the Global Workers Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic, which will be published in the *World Socialist Web Site*.

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