Omicron variant thrashes global luxury cruising industry

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The Omicron variant of the coronavirus has ripped through existing mitigation measures on cruise ships around the world, creating widespread anxiety among the industry's customers and workforce. Beginning last week, a sharp increase in outbreaks has occurred on dozens of ships across the globe. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has recently marked over 80 vessels as "yellow" in its color coding system, indicating that "[r]eported cases of COVID-19 have met the threshold for CDC investigation" on each of such ships.

The CDC's color roster only includes vessels which are currently sailing in or plan to sail in US waters. There are likely dozens more ships around the world which are experiencing similar outbreaks. While ship operators under the CDC's guidance are not required to document how many infections there are on board, Royal Caribbean Cruise Line's (RCCL) Symphony of the Seas, the biggest cruise ship in the world, has reported an outbreak of 48 among approximately 6,000 occupants.

There have been widespread disruptions to the itineraries of a large and growing number of ships due to onboard COVID-19 infection. Such ships have included Carnival Cruise Line's (CCL) Freedom, RCCL's Symphony, Odyssey and Allure of the Seas, Holland America Line's (HAL) MS Zuiderdam and MS Konigsdam, Norwegian Cruise Line's (NCL) Epic and Breakaway, as well as Cunard's the Queen Mary and the Queen Victoria.

Port governments including those of Mexico, Aruba, Bonaire and Colombia have denied entry to passengers on ships which have high levels of infection, and several vessels have opted to make changes to their routes, citing concerns of COVID-19 and related restrictions.

The health agency of Puerto Rico announced on December 26 that it would require all visitors from cruise ships to present a negative COVID-19 test within 48 hours of entry. In response, nearly a dozen calls to dock in the port of San Juan have been cancelled by the Royal Caribbean International (RCI), the umbrella corporation of several major cruise lines. The company has issued a warning to its customers of the possibility of further port cancellations and onboard activity disruptions due to Omicron.

In response to the recent surge on cruise ships, US Democratic Senator Richard Blumenthal from Connecticut called for a complete shutdown of the industry. "Our warnings have proved sadly prescient & continuously compelling. Time for CDC & cruise lines to protect consumers & again pause— docking their ships. Cruises are repeating recent history as petri dishes of COVID infection," Blumenthal posted on Twitter.

In the past week, several cruise ship passengers have taken to news outlets and social media to denounce conditions on board, with many citing a lack of accurate reporting to guests and crew. "I feel like I just spent my past week at a superspreader event," one passenger who had recently disembarked the Carnival Freedom tweeted.

Since this summer, the global cruising industry has ramped up its testing, onboard quarantining, vaccination and masking protocols across the board since its resumption of operations after the 15-month, worldwide shutdown began in March, 2020. These safety measures, as important as they are, have largely been used as a pretext to recklessly and criminally reopen the multibillion-dollar industry without respect to the risk that it poses to the physical and mental health and safety of its customers and crew.

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The cruise industry has responded to the recent surge in outbreaks with reassurances of the efficiency of their existing health procedures, as well as the announcement of limited and inconsistent measures to contain the spread of the virus onboard.

The *Washington Post* published an article Tuesday which backed plans by the industry to continue to operate while shipboard coronavirus cases explode around the world. The article, entitled "Covid is spreading on cruises again. This time they plan to keep sailing," repeating hollow claims by Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA) spokeswoman Bari Golin-Blaugrund that infections on ships represented only a minority of the total number of passengers currently sailing. The publication downplayed the risks of Omicron on ships, citing the fact that many of the detected cases have been asymptomatic.

During the initial months of the pandemic, cruise ships were the scene of what former HAL President Orlando Ashford called a "humanitarian crisis" involving hundreds of thousands of cruise guests and staff. In 2020, there were over 3,000 infections and 77 COVID-19 deaths on cruise ships. After passengers were evacuated, approximately 200,000 employees remained stranded on vessels around the world, most having been stricken from their company payrolls, and with no idea of when they would be able to return to their families. Over a dozen additional non-COVID-19 related deaths among crews occurred during this period which were widely suspected to have been suicides.

To put into perspective the scope of the current crisis on cruise ships, there have been 1,300 COVID-19 infections reported on cruise ships since June 2021, a period in which the entire industry has only been operating at a fraction of its original capacity.

In concert with the approach taken by the entire American ruling class, cruise companies and the CDC are acting on the principle of "do nothing until it is too late" and sacrificing lives and public health in pursuit of private profit. The recent disruptions of cruise ships are a confirmation of the recklessness of the drive to force open the industry in the midst of a global pandemic.

An anonymous submission by a crew member on board MSC Divina to Crew-Center.com, a cruise crew-run news source, reported that there were nearly "80 positive cases for crew and guests." The employee continued, "why [is] the CDC … still giving the right for the ship to sail away with the positive guests[?] We will be denied for sure in many ports. … The management is hiding all these positive guests from all the other guests. Why no action is being taken? We have to stay with all these positive guests for 11 days even if they are isolated [while on the ship]. … For crew, there is no shore leave, the guests can go independently in every port they want [while] they are bringing the virus [back] onboard."

The WSWS urges cruise passengers and crews to form onboard rank-and-file safety committees to take action to safely halt the operation of ships and provide financial compensation for all workers and families affected. Such committees, built in every section of the working class around the world, will be the basis for the saving of lives by pursuing a strategy which will eliminate COVID-19 and finally end the pandemic, in opposition to the criminal policies of the ruling elites everywhere to force the population to "live with" coronavirus.

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