

Cruise ship crews respond to heightened CDC warnings, recommendation to “avoid cruise travel”

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On Thursday, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) updated its advisory for passengers traveling on cruise ships from Level 3 to Level 4, the highest in the organization’s warning system. Accompanying this change was a notice recommending travelers to “avoid cruise travel, regardless of vaccination status.”

The CDC website continued, “[t]he virus that causes COVID-19 spreads easily between people in close quarters on board ships, and the chance of getting COVID-19 on cruise ships is very high, even if you are fully vaccinated and have received a COVID-19 vaccine booster dose.”

A *USA Today* report noted that “[b]etween November 30 and December 14, cruise ships operating in US waters reported 162 cases of COVID-19 to the CDC. Between December 15 and December 29, cruise ships sailing in U.S. waters reported 5,013 COVID-19 cases to the CDC.” These figures represent a roughly a 31-fold or 3,094 percent increase over a two-week period.

Currently, nearly 90 ships are listed as “under investigation” by the CDC for containing onboard COVID cases, although official numbers for each ship are not published. Cruise workers have reported that shipboard managements have failed to release or have actively attempted to obscure infection totals.

The CDC announcement caused an immediate backlash by the global cruise industry. Royal Caribbean’s CEO Richard D. Fain, an individual whose estimated net worth is \$194 million, expressed a callous indifference to the fate of the cruising population, stating that “[o]micron is having a big short-term impact on everyone, but many observers see this as a major step toward COVID-19 becoming endemic rather than epidemic.”

Carnival and Holland America Line have similarly

downplayed the situation, repeatedly referring to the numbers of infected on board as “small.”

The Cruise Line Industry Association (CLIA) responded to the CDC update defensively and doubled down on empty claims that cruise ship travel is safe. Simultaneously, the CLIA said the spread of infection should be considered an inevitable part of cruising, and all other aspects of life as well.

“The decision by the CDC to raise the travel level for cruise is particularly perplexing considering that cases identified on cruise ships consistently make up a very slim minority of the total population onboard—far fewer than on land—and the majority of those cases are asymptomatic or mild in nature, posing little to no burden on medical resources onboard or onshore,” the CLIA stated on Thursday. It continued, “[n]o setting can be immune from this virus—however, it is also the case that cruise provides one of the highest levels of demonstrated mitigation against the virus...[w]e are disappointed and disagree with the [CDC’s] decision to single out the cruise industry.”

In stark contrast to the blasé attitude of the cruise lines and onboard managements — recent reports abound of ships having infection numbers equivalent to and exceeding those on land. However limited the information provided by the industry and its representatives, a rough tally of official and unofficial reports, with the latter having largely been submitted by crew members themselves through social media, show the following:

? 100 positive cases were reported on board Virgin Voyages’ *Scarlet Lady*, a ship with a capacity of 1,160 crew and 2,770 passengers, operating at 50-65 percent. Many onboard cases have been reported as symptomatic.

? Approximately 100 positive cases were reported on board *AIDANova*, sailing with roughly 3,000 passengers and a maximum of 1,646 crew.

? Costa *Firenze*, containing 1,600 guests and crew reported 30 COVID-positive crew members being disembarked and 40 more employees who were deemed close contacts being isolated within the ship.

? 50 crew member positive cases and one passenger positive case were reported on the Carnival *Vista*, a ship with a 3,934-passenger capacity and a 1,450-crew capacity (total 5,384).

? 89 positive cases were reported on the Carnival *Panorama*, a ship with a 4,008-passenger capacity and a 1,450-crew capacity (total 5,458).

? 49 crew member positive cases and one passenger positive case were reported on Royal Caribbean's *Harmony of the Seas*, a ship with a 5,479-passenger capacity and a 2,300-crew capacity (total 7,779).

? 48 total positive cases were reported on Royal Caribbean's *Symphony of the Seas*, a ship with a 5,518-passenger capacity and a 2,200-crew capacity (total 7,718).

? At least 69 total positive cases were reported on Royal Caribbean's *Odyssey of the Seas*, a ship with a 4,246-passenger capacity and a 1,551-crew capacity (total 5,797).

? 50 total positive cases, with at least 45 being among crew members, were reported on Royal Caribbean's *Jewel of the Seas*, which currently has 1,700 passengers and 800 crew members (total 2,500). It has been also reported that infected crew members have been working while symptomatic. Several COVID-positive crew were moved onto another ship in order for the management to circumvent the port government's restrictions on vessels containing more than a 1 percent COVID-positive rate among its population.

? 21 crew member positive cases on Holland America Line's *MS Koningsdam*, a ship with a 2,650-passenger capacity and a 1,036-crew capacity (total 3,638).

? 51 crew member positive cases, 27 passenger positive case and 54 more close contacts were identified on MSC's *Splendida* by Brazilian health authorities. The ship has a 5,479-passenger capacity and a 2,300-crew capacity (total 7,779)

? 80 total positive cases were reported on MSC's *Divina*, a 3,502-passenger capacity and 1,388 crew capacity ship (4,890).

In response to the current crisis, the cruise industry management toadies have been empowered to intimidate and threaten crew members who speak out about the conditions in their workplaces on social media.

A hostile comment on a public cruise crew social media

page 10
read, "I have been reading posts for the last few days and with all the negative posts and comments from crew members onboard...it's only a matter of time that their WiFi onboard will be cut off. Keep it within your company and don't be calling out on social media. I'm sure that your companies have a complaints procedure onboard to protect you, and if your complaints are not being heard onboard via that route then take the matter further to the Company DPA. You are not doing yourselves any favors by airing your grievances on a social media platform that will most probably be monitored. I have seen crew members being fired for less as it is classed a gross misconduct."

Other crew members responded to the threats by defenders of the companies. "The crowd of people who scream about resigning and giving your job to someone should shut up," one wrote. "Some of us come from places with basic human and labor rights and hold the cruise companies to a higher standard...If you're willing to work in an unsafe environment just so you can go back to work, then you should take a look at yourself in the mirror."

"People don't seem to like crew members saying what's happening... I wonder why," wrote another user.

Another wrote, "Thank you for posting and keeping us informed with everything happening in every ship. Regardless of what others say, it's great crew members can have a voice somewhere and we can stay updated with things you don't see in the news."

Cruise ship workers intent on defending their right to a safe workplace should contact the WSWS about building maritime rank-and-file safety committees to protect the health, well-being and incomes of cruise ship crew and guests, as well as that of workers in all industries in countries around the world. The health of passengers and crew must not be subordinated to the drive for profits by the cruise industry owners.



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