

Cruise ship workers must form committees to protect the lives, health of passengers and crew!

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Thousands of cruise ship crews and passengers around the world are threatened by the rapidly spreading Omicron variant of the coronavirus. Following the hasty reopening of the cruise ship industry after the global shutdown in 2020, during which at least 70 people died and approximately 200,000 crew members were left stranded around the world, another wave of infection threatens to destabilize the industry. Only this time, the corporate establishment is determined to keep operations running no matter the cost to human life and health.

This situation poses the urgent need for cruise industry workers to take independent action to protect their health and lives through the building of independent workers committees to monitor the health and safety of the population and protect lives. No confidence can be placed in the rapacious cruise ship operators or their paid political operatives.

The US Biden administration and governments throughout the world are minimizing the dangers posed by Omicron in order to justify a policy of profits before health and safety. The American political establishment has ruthlessly fought to keep businesses and schools open while infections continue to spiral out of control, hospitalizations and deaths rise, while the full long-term health effects of COVID still remain largely unknown.

Capitalist governments globally have followed the lead of their American counterparts. Australia and New Zealand, whose administrations once pursued a “Zero COVID” approach, have abandoned this strategy in favor of letting the virus rip through the population. The national government of Mexico, with a population of 126 million and nearly 300,000 COVID-19 deaths,

recently undermined the decision of the Jalisco state administration to block cruise ships with infected passengers. Instead, it announced that the country would wholly allow asymptomatic cruise travelers entry, even if they have tested positive for coronavirus.

Notwithstanding the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) latest guidance on cruise ships—itsself riddled with loopholes and contradictions which allow widespread underreporting and circumvention of restrictions—this American health agency has made significant capitulations to Wall Street’s demand that the population should learn to “live with” the virus. In the midst of an explosive surge of the new variant, the CDC recently reduced the number of recommended days for infected individuals to quarantine from 10—which was itself a reduction from the originally recommended 14—to a mere five days. Additionally, the CDC has played an instrumental role in ensuring that schools and workplaces remain open while the pandemic rages.

Multimillionaire Royal Caribbean Cruises CEO Richard D. Fain has ominously hailed Omicron as “a major step toward COVID-19 becoming endemic rather than epidemic.” In no uncertain terms, this spells his endorsement of a sustained future of mass infection, death and uncertainty for the vast majority of working people, including cruise ship employees, who because of the nature of their work are particularly exposed. With over 800,000 total COVID-19 deaths in the US and nearly 5.5 million dead worldwide, calls for the virus’s endemicity are nothing short of criminal.

Wall Street has responded with a callous indifference to the current tumult in the cruise ship industry. Confident that the banks and the government will do

everything in their power to protect investments, it sees the current CDC ruling as only a small obstacle to the continued bolstering of stock prices. A January 1 article in *Barron*'s financial news cited a travel industry analyst bemoaning the new health recommendations while simultaneously exuding confidence that the cruise companies have "pretty sufficient liquidity buffers to get through this." The analyst continued, "[t]he view is that the CDC does not derail the second half of '22 and '23 recovery."

The cruise industry's strategy for weathering the Omicron storm has been to downplay the variant's threat to operations, falsely portraying its severity as minimal. It has touted existing shipboard mitigation measures, such as masking, vaccination requirements, sanitation and extremely limited social distancing, as a sufficient bandage for the effects of the explosive global health crisis.

Claims that the virus's spread on ships is minimal have already been undermined by recent reports of thousands of positive cases across dozens of ships the world over. Furthermore, even if it were true that a lessened severity of Omicron would lead to fewer deaths in the environment of a cruise ship—itsself an unfounded claim considering the alarming warnings by prominent epidemiologists as well as the relative newness of the situation—the consequences of wide transmission of COVID-19 on board will inevitably be disastrous.

As has been the case in workplaces across the globe, the effects of a renewed surge of the coronavirus on cruise ships will inevitably include the following:

? Personnel shortages due to quarantine and medical disembarkation, which will lead to increased workloads for already overworked crews

? Sudden changes in route and itinerary, which will disrupt the flow of goods and supplies, as well as the embarkation/disembarkation schedule of workers and passengers, further burdening crews

? Shoreside supply and distribution disruptions, which will stress fragile on-board systems

? Influxes of new patients to onboard medical facilities, which will strain and overwhelm limited shipboard hospital systems and staff

? Shoreside hospital strain, which will likely create further itinerary disruptions and compound shipboard medical system stress

? Sudden changes in already capricious crew privileges, including shore leave, communication and recreation

? Separation of crew and passengers from their friends, family, and colleagues due to medical isolation and shoreside quarantine

? Financial strain on passengers and crew due to medical and work disruptions

? Widespread lack of communication of vital information for the execution of duties

In contrast to the criminal indifference of Wall Street and the corporate elite, cruise ship workers have an urgent need to protect the health, safety and well-being of their colleagues, families and guests. They must form rank-and-file safety committees to build the leadership of the struggle for basic human rights and workplace conditions both onboard and in their home countries.

Such committees must take as a starting point the unconditional prioritization of human life over corporate profit and will act as central networks for the distribution of vital information among rank-and-file shipboard crew and passengers. These organizations must be run democratically and intimately connected with other workers' committees in industries and countries across the world. They must fight to enforce measures to protect the health and safety of crews and passengers, including the suspension of operations with full financial compensation to crew members if conditions warrant.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) will provide theoretical and practical political guidance to these organizations, and the WSWS will publish important updates, statements and briefings in relation to their struggles.



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