

“The virus is rampant onboard...”

Cruise ship doctor exposes shipboard conditions amid Omicron crisis

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If you are a cruise ship worker, contact the WSWS to provide information on working conditions and the spread of the pandemic.

Last Thursday, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued a general warning for all passengers to “avoid cruise travel” regardless of their vaccination status. This followed the agency’s notice that over 80 cruise ships sailing in US waters met the threshold for health investigations due to onboard positive COVID-19 cases.

Additionally, the agency has announced that there has been an explosion of positive cases on ships in the weeks since mid-December. Currently, there are at least 94 ships under CDC investigation, and onboard cases are regularly reported in the hundreds per vessel.

Reports have been widespread from cruise guests and employees that onboard managements have withheld information about the total number of cases from the public. Instead, as is now similarly the case in classrooms and workplaces around the world, colleagues and friends suddenly go absent with the rest of the community left to wonder and speculate.

There have been many accounts of health and safety regulations being blatantly disregarded, with dozens of ill occupants being clandestinely herded into separate quarantine vessels, onboard isolation wards and land-based facilities.

There has been a large and growing number of instances of ships being denied entry by port governments around the world due to infections. This has created a situation in which cruise companies cannot guarantee that the voyage will go as originally planned, and many customers have responded by cancelling their vacations or voicing their outrage

publicly.

Although last week two major cruise lines, Royal Caribbean and Norwegian Cruise Lines announced the suspension of several sailings due to the Omicron crisis, the cruise industry press and the mainstream American media have attempted to cover their tracks, repeating the narrative that Omicron is “mild” and that therefore, there is fundamentally nothing to worry about.

A Thursday *New York Times* article, which chronicled numerous nightmarish experiences faced by passengers on ships that are riddled with COVID-19, echoed the lies pushed by industry representatives. Addressing the concerns of an interviewee who denounced the lack of accurate infection reporting on his recent cruise, the publication uncritically cited a Celebrity Cruises spokesperson who dismissed the call for accurate coronavirus reporting.

“Publishing a dashboard of daily cases to all persons onboard is a less meaningful public health mitigation measure than reinforcing continuous adherence to our industry-leading health and safety protocols, which has resulted in lower prevalence rates onboard than those found shoreside,” the representative said.

Cruise ship crew members have taken to voicing their frustration at the situation on social media. Disruptions in staffing due to onboard COVID-19 outbreaks have heavily burdened an already strained workforce. Shipboard medical staff have been hit particularly hard by sudden operational changes due to Omicron.

“Two more reports of mental breakdowns from fatigued medical officers facing unpaid overtime & increasing Omicron cases on cruise ships,” a Twitter post by a seafarer’s support organization wrote. “The

only response to their concerns so far? A reminder from their companies not to speak to social media groups.”

In opposition to the demands that workers keep silent, a cruise ship doctor wrote to the WSWS to expose onboard conditions in detail. What follows is his account:

“The surge in COVID cases has been so stressful and the medical team has been working 12-17 hours each day over the last 2 weeks. It’s extremely stressful, and we are on the verge of a mental breakdown.

“The leadership on board and shoreside [offices] basically say, ‘well, the cases are mild, so let’s keep cruising.’

“Today alone we had 30 cases, in total we have 81 cases on board, and that’s after we disembarked 52 crew members at the start of the current voyage. ... Today we were denied entry to [the company’s] own [private] island. ...

“The plan is to transfer all the positive cases to another ship tomorrow to bring our [positive] numbers down, but the fact of the matter is that the virus is rampant onboard. ... [Crew recreational facilities are] still open, not much has changed, just business as usual, at the expense of us health care workers...

“I have just reached the end of my patience. ... we have been asking the head office to improve the conditions and our compensation for the past 6 months (at least). ... They were so focused on saving money that they made no efforts to retain medical staff during the pandemic. ... Now those of us that remained with the company are paying the price.

“[The shoreside management offices] tell us they have been having meetings every day to make things better, but we never saw any action, until recently. Myself and my medical colleagues onboard sent a very strong email ... and told them we would approach the media with regards to our labor rights violations, and as a last resort we would consider striking if they didn’t change something fast...

“I showed that email to other medical colleagues across the fleet, on a WhatsApp group, and some of them also sent emails to the head office expressing their frustration regarding the situation. Only then did we get a response, stating that we would receive details about compensation in the first week of January...

“[I feel] disgusted by the way the other crew members onboard are taken advantage of by the

company ... they are also working really hard and getting nothing extra despite the increased workload.

“[Right now] they are just grateful to have work, despite the fact that the company just grinds as much as it can out of its employees with very little focus on our well-being. ... Profit is all that matters, workers are replaceable. Only when workers that are a bit more difficult to replace, like medical staff, make a scene, do they make an effort to improve conditions. ... [But only] for a select few.

“... enough is enough. ... I want the world to know how the cruise ship industry takes advantage of its workers.”

In waging a courageous struggle against their employers, cruise ship crews also face the entire American and global financial establishment. They can and must take on such formidable opponents, but their fight must be guided politically and theoretically at the highest possible level. We urge maritime employees to link their efforts with workers in every industry and country who face similar conditions. They must form rank-and-file safety committees to take on the tasks of carrying these struggles forward around the world.



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