

Mass infections among New York City transit workers raises prospect of further deaths

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Thousands of New York City transit workers have fallen ill with COVID-19 over the past few weeks, as Omicron cases explode in the city and across the country. Throughout the pandemic, at least 177 of the city's transit workers have died from the virus.

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) revealed that during the first week of 2022, roughly 20 percent of subway operators and conductors and about 25 percent of bus drivers were out sick. Mass illness has continued into this week, with more than 4,000 workers across the agency on sick leave.

The mass infections are the result of policies pursued by the MTA in concert with Democratic Party officials at the city, state, and national levels, and supported by the Transport Workers Union (TWU) local 100. These are aimed at keeping the economy fully open in the midst of the worst surge so far, openly subordinating human lives to Wall Street's bottom line. Governor Kathy Hochul and Mayor Eric Adams, who took office in the new year, explicitly rejected calls to close schools and workplaces to prevent record transmission. In a revealing slip of the tongue, Adams stated the motivation early last week, declaring, "It's time to open up and feed our ecosystem, our financial ecosystem."

Indeed, Wall Street has been nourished with the deaths of countless workers who had been infected on the job. But feeding the "financial ecosystem" is impossible without a functioning transit system to ferry millions of workers to their jobs and ensure profits continue to flow.

Just in the past month, a staggering 727,000 have tested positive in New York City, or one out of every 12 residents. The positivity rate over this period has averaged over 30 percent. This means the actual case count is likely far higher, as many were unwilling or

unable to wait in hours-long lines for testing. Hospitalizations and deaths have also doubled in the past two weeks.

The TWU, while largely silent on a pandemic that has killed an extraordinary number of its members, has been a boisterous supporter of Mayor Adams. They endorsed Adams early on during his right-wing campaign. They have loudly cheered every move by the new mayor, who was inaugurated during the New Year's Eve super-spreader event in Times Square, to increase the presence of police on subways and buses. The TWU accepts the framework that the social devastation that has accelerated during the pandemic is a matter of law and order.

The only recent public reference to the pandemic by the TWU was in a radio spot over the holidays. In it, TWU local 100 President Tony Utano celebrated the full reopening of the city and stressed the role which 24/7 transit operations played in it.

The TWU has also backed the MTA's singular focus on increasing ridership to shore up its finances, which remain on shaky ground in the long term despite an injection of federal funds. MTA chief Janno Lieber stressed raising more revenues from riders were his "number one, number two, and number three priorities."

Inevitably, the attempts to increase ridership amid the pandemic have backfired. Over the last two weeks, subway ridership has dropped to around 40 percent of 2019 levels, as masses of workers and students have fallen ill or stayed home in an attempt to avoid catching the deadly virus.

The mass infection of transit workers has also led to significant service disruptions. Service on multiple subway lines has been suspended due to staff shortages. Other lines have transitioned from express to local. The

chaos has, in turn, increased the danger of transmission, as passengers and workers face increased crowding and longer journeys.

Even as thousands of workers have caught COVID, the MTA continues reckless policies that only worsen the spread. The agency requires vaccinated workers who have been exposed to the virus but show no symptoms to remain on the job. Furthermore, even if they do test positive, they can be called back to work after just five days if they are asymptomatic or their symptoms are “resolving,” regardless of the results of a subsequent test.

These policies follow Biden’s CDC’s guidance, which was revised without any scientific merit based on the demands of businesses to remain staffed. The national policy followed a New York directive issued in late December by Democratic Governor Hochul, shortening the quarantine period to five days for transit workers and other “critical workers.”

“We need you again. We need you to be able to go to work,” Hochul remarked at a press conference on Christmas Eve. Long faded are the hollow phrases by politicians praising “essential workers,” replaced with orders to get to back work.

For their sacrifice, New York transit workers are receiving a pay cut in real terms. The measly pay raise of 2.5 percent last May is less than half the official inflation rate, which has soared to seven percent, the highest level in 40 years.

Worker shortages have been a recurring issue throughout the pandemic for the MTA, which had a hiring freeze in place for years before the pandemic began. Part of the agency’s response has been to appeal to retired transit workers to return to service. Given the particularly heavy toll which the pandemic has taken on seniors, killing more than one in every 100 Americans over 65, bringing back retirees is an invitation to endanger their lives.

The assertions by the MTA and government officials that the transit system is safe is a lie. The crowded conditions and lengthened commutes provide an opportunity for the highly transmissible strain to spread. It is not only buses and subways but also crowded stations, platforms, and stairwells that pose dangers. From poorly ventilated crew rooms and dispatch facilities to unsanitary locker rooms, transit workers face a host of other exposure points that

contribute to the rapid spread within the work force.

The TWU’s silence on the COVID danger is intentional. They serve not the workers they supposedly represent, but the MTA and Democratic Party officials who intend to keep the economy open at all costs. The TWU’s silence functions to acclimate workers to a new normal of mass death.

Every new transit worker’s illness and death is a social crime. Significant opposition exists to these policies of mass death, but it must be organized. The *World Socialist Web Site* urges transit workers to organize independent rank-and-file safety committees to fight for the measures needed to save lives.



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