

NFL halts COVID-19 testing of football players

Alan Gilman
23 January 2022

The National Football League (NFL) and the National Football Players Association (NFLPA) announced Friday an agreement to stop daily coronavirus testing for unvaccinated players through the end of the season, according to a memo distributed to teams that was obtained by the sports cable channel ESPN.

Instead of daily testing of unvaccinated players, the NFL said it will simply add unvaccinated players to its existing symptom screening and surveillance programs. Accordingly, both unvaccinated and vaccinated players will be tested only if they report symptoms.

The NFL made the change in an effort to ensure that each of the remaining eight playoff teams would have available its full complement of players. This past weekend featured four games, with the winners advancing to the conference championships, to be played next Sunday. The two conference champions will then meet in the Super Bowl, to be played in Los Angeles on February 13.

All of these games are being played in stadiums packed with tens of thousands of fans in the midst of the raging Omicron wave. The holding of these super-spreader events is in line with the deliberate policy of the US ruling elite and the entire political establishment to facilitate mass infection of the population, regardless the loss of life. Countless millions, if not billions, in profits are at stake for the team owners, the corporate media and the Wall Street speculators.

In an attempt to explain and justify halting the testing, the memo obtained by ESPN states: “This comprehensive, symptom-based approach to testing reflects our recent experience with the omicron variant and conforms to current public health recommendations and best practices employed in healthcare, and offers the best opportunity for identifying and treating cases

promptly and avoiding spread within the facility.”

The “recent experience with the omicron variant” is a massive outbreak of infections that occurred in mid-December, requiring the postponement and rescheduling of three games after more than 100 players were added to the reserve/COVID-19 list in a single week.

The NFL at that time described the COVID-19/reserve list as being for players who either test positive for COVID-19 or who have been quarantined after having been in close contact with an infected person or persons.

At the same time, professional basketball and hockey, as well as college sports, were being similarly impacted by Omicron. Those sports, however, were in the early parts of their seasons and could in many cases cancel games for one to two weeks, knowing they could reschedule the canceled games later in the season. The NFL, nearing the end of its season and with the playoffs approaching, did not have that flexibility.

Consequently, to deal with the Omicron surge, NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell on December 17 issued a memo to all 32 teams stating that fully vaccinated, asymptomatic individuals would no longer be subject to weekly testing.

In the memo, Goodell went on to declare: “Medical information strongly indicates that this variant is significantly more contagious but possibly less severe than prior variants, particularly for people who are fully vaccinated and have received a booster shot.

“Our experience with the Omicron variant is fully consistent with this expectation—while more players and staff are testing positive, roughly two-thirds of those individuals are asymptomatic, most of the remaining individuals have only mild symptoms, and the virus appears to clear positive individuals more rapidly than

was true with the Delta and other variants. In many respects, Omicron appears to be a very different illness from the one we first confronted in the spring of 2020.”

The NFL ended mandatory testing for asymptomatic vaccinated players and, following CDC “guidelines,” reduced mandatory isolation for such players from 10 days to five days.

Considering that 95 percent of all players were vaccinated, and several teams were at 100 percent, these changes greatly reduced the likelihood that any players would be forced to miss games and require games to be canceled.

With the playoffs, however, the NFL, with the collaboration of the players’ union, wanted to ensure the eligibility of unvaccinated players.

The vaccination status of players is confidential, but in some cases has been made known by the length of time a player has to isolate if in contact with someone positive (10 days for the unvaccinated), by masking requirements that apply only to the unvaccinated, or by personal disclosures.

As of last Friday, it was estimated that of the eight remaining playoff teams, at least 12 players were unvaccinated, including Aaron Rogers, the star quarterback of the playoff-contending Green Bay Packers.

Rogers, who is a candidate for the Most Valuable Player of the year award, earlier in the season had to miss a game when he tested positive and was forced to isolate for 10 days as an unvaccinated player. The NFL clearly feared that if a player of Rogers’ stature was forced to miss a playoff game, it would likely cause his team to lose and the legitimacy of the playoffs would be questioned. Hence the decision to terminate testing of unvaccinated players.

The decision—placing corporate profits before human lives—epitomizes the ruthless and deadly policy being pursued by virtually all capitalist governments around the world, dictated by the corporate interests that control them.

The NFL playoffs generate hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue, particularly through television advertising. The Super Bowl itself has become an unofficial national holiday, viewed at times by over 100 million people. A 30-second commercial during last year’s game sold for \$5.6 million.

With the potential for such a massive audience and

hundreds of millions in TV revenue, the NFL would not allow COVID-19 to impede its largest revenue-generating games. The market needs of the NFL require that the games proceed at the expense of the health and lives of its players, staff and their families.

On Saturday, Rogers’ Packers, who were viewed as one of the Super Bowl favorites, were upset by the San Francisco 49ers, 13-10.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact