

Growing opposition to CUNY push to cripple remote learning options for spring semester

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A groundswell of popular hostility is mounting over the effective axing of remote learning options for faculty and students at the City University of New York (CUNY) public university system. Early last fall, the administration announced its “70/30” plan for the spring, which stipulates that 70 percent of all classes are to be held in-person citywide. Previously, remote learning had largely been maintained since the initial shutdowns of 2020, and was widely available for students who preferred it.

Since the beginning of the fall 2021 term, the CUNY university administration has justified its push toward face-to-face classes by touting rigorous adherence to vaccine mandates. Despite the fact that the explosion of the Omicron variant has ripped to shreds all pretenses that vaccination alone can protect the population from illness, the university administration has doubled down in its drive to force students back into unsafe classrooms for the current semester, abandoning the threadbare pretenses of doing anything significant to mitigate infection, illness and death.

The CUNY system consists of 18 senior colleges and seven community colleges which are scattered throughout the city’s five boroughs. In total, the 25 campuses have an enrollment of approximately 270,000 students. According to last week’s data from the CUNY coronavirus dashboard, the average positivity rate of the 7,290 COVID tests (just 2.7 percent of students) conducted across all universities and colleges is 5 percent, with 448 positive cases being reported. The real numbers are most likely much higher since positive cases from non-CUNY testing sites are only reported voluntarily.

The Craig Newmark School of Journalism, located in midtown Manhattan, had the highest level of infection of any campus, with a positivity rate of 15.7 percent.

New York City has been an epicenter in the explosion of Omicron. From the beginning of December, 2021 to mid-January, the weekly average of new coronavirus infections saw a nearly 20-fold increase, while related hospitalizations and deaths increased by approximately a factor of 10. While the city government has endlessly hailed the decline of COVID cases in the current wave as good news, stories from workers and youth emerge daily, painting an entirely different picture.

A chilling memorial page dedicated to CUNY’s victims of

COVID-19, last updated in late December, lists 48 individuals from CUNY communities who have succumbed to the virus. The list of the deceased includes students, administrators, professors, adjuncts, alumni and staff.

Early this month, a viral Change.org petition entitled “SAVE ONLINE CLASSES AT CUNY!!” circulated, which quickly garnered thousands of signatures by students and workers. As of Monday evening, the petition had nearly 26,000 signatures, primarily from students. It continues to grow in numbers by the hundreds each week. In the website’s nationwide category of “Support Remote Learning and Flexible Grading Policies” campaigns, the CUNY petition was the most popular. With roughly 9,000 more signatures, it will rank among the site’s most popular initiatives.

Hundreds of petition signers submitted public comments which overwhelmingly expressed two main considerations: first, the danger of returning to in-person learning; and second, the flexibility and convenience that virtual learning has provided for many hard working students and families.

“It’s too hard readjusting to almost all physical [classes]. Plus, I lost someone to COVID so it terrifies me,” an individual who supported the petition wrote.

“Online gives me the opportunity to take care of my family, work and further my education. I’ve lost several family members to COVID, even ones that were vaccinated. So in-person is not a route I’d like to take,” wrote another user.

One commenter voiced their unequivocal support for protecting safety above all other concerns. “We need to push for online classes again - with the recent Omicron spike(s) here in New York City, we can’t guarantee our chances of NOT getting COVID for the first time or again. We need to ensure we’re all safe, staff and students alike.”

“I am both a CUNY graduate and First Responder and think it’s wildly irresponsible for students to be forced to take in-person classes in the midst of a pandemic,” another signer said.

A further indicator of the tremendous opposition to CUNY’s reopening policies by students has been the fact that enrollment has decreased dramatically for in-person classes across the city. One CUNY adjunct professor reported that the English department at LaGuardia Community College in Queens had only 4 percent of its in-person classes filled, while online

classes had been fully booked.

In response to the drop in enrollment, the university system has canceled classes which fail to meet a minimum number of participants, sparking widespread opposition from faculty and staff. Two protests were organized on Friday by the Professional Staff Congress (PSC), the union nominally representing approximately 30,000 CUNY employees across the city. The demonstrations took place at Bronx Community College and Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn and channeled broad opposition into the vague demand to “protect jobs” at CUNY, as well as for perfunctory safety measures which will do little to stem the onslaught of Omicron. Brooklyn Democratic City Councilwoman Crystal Hudson spoke at the Medgar Evers event.

An active Twitter account called “COVIDatCUNY,” which anonymously shares CUNY faculty submissions on their reopening experiences and workplace safety concerns, made the following comment recently: “Per an email sent to the Chancellor, Provost, and college presidents this morning and shared with union delegates, the [PSC] union has entirely given up on fighting for online classes or online work for staff and is instead just urging for more flexibility with accommodations.

“The email shared this morning, via hyper-conciliatory language about how ‘we agree’ that ‘maintaining a mostly in-person semester is vitally important,’ makes it sound like all of the other demands have been abandoned and that these are the new ones.”

Since 2020, the university administration has used the pandemic as a pretext to mount a draconian assault on its faculty, staff and students, as the PSC has limply stood by. In the summer of 2020, the university system laid off 2,800 adjunct faculty and staff. Last year, it breached a contract with 2,500 assistant staff and lecturers and withheld annual raises of between \$1,000 and \$1,500 for these workers, who were already earning less than \$48,000 per year. Additionally, tuition was raised by nearly \$400.

Furthermore, the CUNY system has been the scene of a decades-long effort to gut public education spending in the service of private interests, going all the way back to the Giuliani administration. The current chancellor of CUNY, Félix V. Matos Rodríguez, makes an annual salary of \$670,000 plus a \$7,000 stipend for housing. His estimated net worth is \$10.8 million.

On Friday, a CUNY faculty member pointed to the sheer irrationality and hypocrisy of the administration’s policies in a tweet. Regarding his concerns over his ability to teach in-person due to a region-wide snowstorm on Saturday, the employee complained, “get this, they’re telling us classes aren’t actually canceled but we should hold them remotely!!! The nerve of these MFs!”

Another faculty member at Bronx Community College bemoaned the dilapidated physical conditions of the building. “An entire building at Bronx Community College has no

[heating, venting, and air conditioning] lots of leaks, lots of mold, and one person has a hole in his office ceiling. Trash from upstairs sometimes falls through this hole.” Responding to this comment, another academic worker wrote, “Very similar problems at [Hunter College]. It’s a CUNY-wide occurrence.”

The PSC, a branch of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) union, is thoroughly hostile to the shutting down of unsafe face-to-face classes and the switch to remote instruction. This organization has done next to nothing in the face of the longstanding series of attacks by the administration and city government. Like the organization’s multimillionaire leader Randi Weingarten, PSC president James Davis—albeit perhaps in a more duplicitous and concealed manner—is no less opposed to the will of students, faculty and staff to protect the lives, safety and financial wellbeing of thousands.

In an op-ed published in the *New York Daily News* last Friday, Davis merely called for the delaying of in-person learning by two weeks. “We know that in-person learning and student support tend to yield better outcomes than online education, despite the real advances in pedagogy and curriculum development we have made of necessity in the past two years. Our question has been whether it is safe to call large numbers of students, faculty and staff back to campuses on Jan. 28. The [PSC] has urged CUNY to delay the start of in-person instruction by two weeks. ...We support a largely in-person Spring term but think it is achievable through a remote transition window, as many other colleges and universities have done.”

Students, workers and academic faculty who are serious about taking up a struggle against the murderous policies of the CUNY administration should put no faith in the bankrupt, pro-business trade unions, the Democratic party, or any other political organization which seeks to reform the capitalist system from within. Instead, they must turn toward the growing independent movement of rank-and-file workers across the globe, which is aligned with the International Workers Alliance of Rank and File Committees.



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