

Children dying as “triple-demic” of COVID, flu and RSV swamps New York

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In line with trends across the United States, for several weeks now cases of respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), COVID-19 and the influenza have been at high levels in New York City and New York state. COVID cases have increased by 50 percent since Thanksgiving. The state’s health department estimates that 1,595 people are now hospitalized with COVID-19 in New York City, twice as many as since the middle of September.

The COVID test positivity rate for the last seven days has been about 13 percent for both city and state. Some neighborhoods in New York City have positivity rates as high as 22 percent. Deaths from COVID in the city in the last two weeks have increased by almost 200 percent, with 128 people dying in the first two weeks of December, according to the statistics compiled by the city.

These figures, as they have been for months, are a drastic undercount of the actual spread of the deadly virus since most tests done with over-the-counter rapid antigen tests are not recorded by the city or the state. The most rapidly increasing variant of the coronavirus in the city is XXB, a hybrid of two BA.2 variants. XXB is known to be resistant to COVID vaccines.

On November 17, New York City statistics revealed another death of a child and two more on November 28 from COVID-related causes. No politician commented on this. No official institution decried these deaths as an unnecessary tragedy, and no media outlet, besides the *World Socialist Web Site*, has reported it. It was left up to educators to notice and publicize the deaths on social media. This follows a months-long pattern in which pediatric deaths—at least three children also died in March from COVID—are simply concealed by the authorities.

The reason is not hard to find. The actual state of the pandemic directly cuts across the “Stay safe, stay open” program of the Democratic Mayor Eric Adams and his Chancellor of Schools, David Banks, which keeps in-person learning in the schools—one of the main vectors of the disease—open no matter what.

Meanwhile, flu cases now make up 13 percent of all hospital visits in the city. The state’s Department of Health (DOH) reported a 64 percent increase in influenza statewide on the week ending December 3 over the previous week with a positivity rate of 35 percent of those tested. Statewide,

hospitalizations because of the flu increased by 58 percent in the same period. On Wednesday, the Biden Administration gave New York state permission to use stockpiles of the flu treatment medication Tamiflu. The DOH has reported one pediatric death from the flu this season.

The respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) also continues to hit children particularly hard, with over 300 admitted into New York City hospitals daily, most of them under two years old. The three-week average positivity rate on PCR tests for RSV on December 10 was 7 percent statewide according to the CDC. There is no vaccine for RSV.

True to the pandemic motto of the government, “do nothing until it is too late,” on Thursday the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) advised mask use in areas of high COVID-19 transmission, such as Los Angeles and New York. On December 9, New York City’s Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (NYC DOHMH) advised—but did not mandate—that New Yorkers wear masks indoors. The state’s Health Commissioner Mary Bassett sent out a letter to school districts advising masking, and the city sent a simpler letter to parents of schoolchildren.

It would be hard, nevertheless, to spot a Democratic politician in New York who follows this advice, certainly not the mayor, who has had himself photographed speaking unmasked to equally maskless gatherings across the city, including to audiences of children.

The masking advice is strictly pro-forma for a public that’s has been inundated by propaganda from the media and the government at the federal, state and city levels that the pandemic is over. Aside from the State University of New York at Purchase, in Westchester, New York, which reinstated a mask mandate this week, not a single serious mitigation effort is being made by the authorities in New York to stop the spread of COVID-19, or the other respiratory pathogens. Vaccinations, as with masks, are optional.

What remains of the pandemic infrastructure in New York continues to be dismantled. The city’s single mass-COVID-testing lab, the Pandemic Response Lab, operated by the robotics firm Opentrons, announced this week that it will close by the end of the year. The lab made it possible to run rapid

tests on millions of samples after September 2020, and, later to sequence variants of the virus.

Last week the city's Department of Education reported 5,501 students and staff were infected with COVID-19. On December 14 alone, 692 students tested positive for COVID.

School attendance in the city has declined and educators on social media are reporting that many parents seem to be unaware of the city's mask advisory. One Brooklyn teacher noted that while she is not seeing more masking of students, "I'm noticing a change in attendance rates. Lots out sick."

The increase in numbers of those sick from the three respiratory diseases has not come as a surprise to thousands of New Yorkers, particularly educators, who have had to face the spread of COVID in their classrooms especially since full-time in-person school resumed in September 2021. This segment of the working class, not by any means limited to educators, is well aware of the dangers caused by repeated infections and the disabilities many may suffer later, especially Long COVID. They are also aware that the lack of public health awareness in broad layers of the population is the product of a deliberate campaign by the authorities.

As one New York City teacher remarked on Twitter about the new masking advice, "The truth is that a months-long aggressive campaign to downplay COVID and scoff at masking needs more than a faint recommendation letter sent home. We've been trained to ignore health advisories. Now, here we are."

A parent from the Bronx told the WWS, "It's 'let it rip,' which is really 'let's see who dies, let's see who gets Long COVID.' It should be, if there's an outbreak, you close the schools ... highly populated areas need to be regulated so that people don't get sick. I'm pissed off about this."

The United Federation of Teachers (UFT), the organization that claims to represent the interests of public school educators in New York City, has played an especially scurrilous role during the pandemic. While posting the city's masking advisory, it persists in showing photographs of large groups of unmasked people on its Twitter feed. As one educator on Twitter noted, "Is @UFT going to protect students and staff by supporting this [masking]? Or will they continue to pretend covid is completely over." Parents and teachers responded to her with comments such as: "They'll continue to pretend it's not happening" and "They know and they don't care."

Indeed, every educator and parent knows that the UFT will do nothing to protect the health of staff and children. Not only does the UFT refuse to make even the slightest criticism of the Democratic Party's program of mass COVID infection, but it is so hostile to the basic health care needs of its members that it has backed the administration of Mayor Adams to taking action which would allow city unions to offer retirees cut-rate, privatized health care to save the city money.

The UFT, in fact, was instrumental in opening the schools as soon as possible after then-Mayor Bill de Blasio began to phase

in in-person learning for pre-k and elementary school students in October 2020. The UFT not only facilitated full school reopening in September 2021, but this March supported the Adams administration in dropping mask mandates for older students and for young children in June. The union has also played a decisive role in suppressing the scientific basis for the urgent need for public health measures among its membership and in the schools.

No faction of the UFT leadership, including its opposition caucuses such as the Movement of Rank-and-File Educators (MORE) has called for the closing of schools or strike action to stop the current public health disaster. The educators' unions nationally, like the American Federation of Teachers and National Education Association, have served as a brake on the struggle of workers to protect their health and safety, much less wages and benefits.

A case in point in New York is the attempt by ACT-UAW Local 7902, the union that negotiates on behalf of the New School University adjunct faculty, which has called off a strike at a critical time in the semester and is proposing a yes vote on a tentative agreement with the university that continues to pay poverty wages. The union of course has not commented on the spread of COVID-19 in the city or at the New School campus.

Nationally, the rail unions collaborated with the Democratic Party to pass legislation that offers rail workers no relief from long hours and irregular schedules.

It has only been the Northeast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (NERFSC), a part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, that has fought for mass action by educators and parents to shut the schools and return to high quality remote learning with compensation to parents who must stay home with children as a component of a scientific effort to stop the spread of COVID and end the pandemic. With the additional threat to children and adults of high rates of flu and RSV transmission, that program is now more urgent than ever. Educators, students, and parents who want to fight for public health and all social rights for the working class should join the NERFSC.



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