

New York City transit workers must form rank-and-file committees to save their lives!

By Daniel de Vries
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The past several weeks has been nothing short of catastrophic for the New York City transit workforce. As of April 22, transit workers have documented at least 83 COVID-19 fatalities among active workers at the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), five among active bus drivers at private fleets, and 28 among transit retirees. Since the first fatality was recorded on March 26, the combined death rate exceeds four per day on average.

To date more than 2,400 transit workers have tested positive, over 9,000 have been out on quarantine at some point since March and 4,100 remain in isolation.

The rate of infection for transit workers is more than three times the rate in Elmhurst, Queens, the neighborhood with the highest rate in the city. “What plausible explanation could there be for this horrible tragedy other than that these workers’ place of work was the principal source of their coronavirus infections,” MIT researcher Jeffrey Harris wrote Sunday in the *New York Daily News*, responding to the MTA’s effort to brush aside his study linking the rise of cases to the transit system.

Yet still today, officials refuse to take the necessary steps to ensure workers are protected and to stop the transit system from continuing to spread the virus. Workers report shortages of personal protective equipment (PPE), limited in many cases to just one mask per week. Crowding persists on some buses and trains, after service was reduced due to the sharp fall in ridership. Social media pages are filled with images of disgusting and unsanitary subway cars, which double as homeless shelters. There is no mass testing. Instead a fever brigade takes temperatures of some workers before shifts, detecting illness when it is already too late.

To make matters worse, thousands of transit workers on preventative quarantine or personal leave are now being compelled to return to work, unable to weather the economic storm as paid leave runs out. This includes workers at high risk due to underlying health problems, for whom catching the virus would likely mean a death sentence.

The indifference to the lives of transit workers contrasts starkly with the trillions of dollars the Trump administration and both corporate-controlled parties have handed over to the corporations and Wall Street financial houses.

At the same time, Trump and various Democratic and Republican governors, including New York governor Andrew Cuomo, are pushing for a rapid “reopening of the economy.” A premature return to work has already begun in many parts of the

country and is actively being prepared in New York, where still nearly 500 people die each day and over 5,000 remain in intensive care. The drive to reopen the economy without universal testing and without the infrastructure to trace and isolate new cases will result in an inevitable resurgence of the pandemic.

Transit workers must counter this criminal negligence by demanding a response that places the lives of the working class above profits. No more deaths! No more work under unsafe conditions!

For the transit system to function safely, workers, as well as riders, need:

- Full access to PPE. respirator masks, face shields, gloves and other protective gear must be provided to workers as often as needed to protect their health.

- Rigorous social distancing procedures. Just as entry to supermarkets and other indoor spaces is restricted to ensure social distancing, so too must be access to transit stations, trains and buses.

- Adequate sanitization. Transit vehicles, crew rooms, dispatch offices and other facilities must be fully sanitized as often as needed to prevent the spread of the pandemic.

- Emergency housing for the homeless. The hundreds of thousands of vacant apartments, hotels and other lodgings must be put to social use by providing housing for those in need.

- Universal testing. In contrast to the MTA’s pathetic program to provide 50 tests per day to transit workers, testing must be made available to screen and re-screen workers for coronavirus infections to prevent spread.

- Unlimited leave at full pay. For all those who for health or family reasons are not able to work during the pandemic, they must not be forced out of economic necessity to risk their lives.

Workers’ committees, working in conjunction with health experts, should implement these demands.

In order to fight for this, transit workers should hold online meetings to discuss and formulate these and other demands and form rank-and-file committees throughout the transit system, led by the most trusted and militant workers. These committees must be democratically controlled by the ranks and all leaders subject to immediate recall.

The empty promises and half-measures of the MTA, in collaboration with the Transport Workers Union (TWU), have served more as public relations talking points than as adequate protection for workers. The trail of death under their watch speaks for itself.

Until these measures are taken, workers have every right to shut down the transit system. For as long as necessary, they must demand that the state, city and MTA arrange for alternative transportation and housing options for all essential workers. To claim that there is no money, when trillions are being handed to the Wall Street criminals, is an insult.

Workers must reject the pious and hypocritical statements of Governor Cuomo and Mayor Bill de Blasio, who speak of their concern for health care workers and other front-line employees and their admiration for transit “heroes.” These are the same politicians who last year denounced transit workers as wage thieves for daring to resist cuts. Amid the pandemic, the city and state are preparing austerity budgets that will gut support for health care and other vital services. The MTA has pledged to make bondholders whole, whatever the costs to workers.

Behind their collective refusal to consider even a temporary shutdown of the transit system is a determination not to cede an inch to workers for fear that this would spark a broader movement of resistance by the working class.

At every turn, the TWU has demonstrated its subservience to the government and the MTA. They allowed the agency to ignore its pandemic plan, hoarding stockpiles of masks even as thousands were falling ill. They backed the governor and mayor in their insistence that the system continue to operate even as PPE shortages, unsafe crowding and unsanitary conditions persist, with TWU Local 100 President John Samuelsen telling CNBC, “transit workers are well protected.” At the same time, the union bureaucrats hail an agreement promising a larger life insurance payoff to the families of the dead, hoping it will be sufficient to contain the mounting anger.

It is not Cuomo, de Blasio, or the TWU, but the rank-and-file transit workers who speak for the working class and who are concerned about the dangers not only facing transit workers but the riding public. If lives are to be defended, workers must take matters into their own hands, in opposition to the corrupt trade unions.

Rank-and-file committees must open lines of communication—via social media forums, online meetings and other channels—to formulate and carry out a plan of action based on the fundamental interests of workers.

The situation facing transit workers is not unique. In New York City, the current epicenter of the pandemic, no sector of workers has been immune. Building porters and janitors, educators and hospital workers, for instance, have each experienced scores, if not hundreds, of deaths. This is a process replicated around the globe,

where workers’ lives are put on the line as governments and corporations prepare back-to-work orders.

Appeals to Cuomo and the Democratic Party are a dead end. The Democrats no less than the Republicans speak for the banks and big business. They did nothing to prepare for this crisis, having spent decades slashing funding to public health and other vital services, and they plan to use the crisis to accelerate the attack on the working class.

That is why rank-and-file committees of transit workers must connect their struggles to other sections of workers, mobilizing around demands that articulate the common class interests. A campaign by transit workers to defend their lives and the lives of commuters should become the spearhead of a broader movement by all workers to defend their lives. These committees should link up with Amazon workers, health care workers, teachers, sanitation workers and service workers to fight for the closure of non-essential workplaces, with full compensation, and protection for all workers.

Workers must reject the false choice of working and dying or starving without an income. The bailout for Wall Street must be canceled and the trillions in funding redirected to the working class. The \$45 billion transit debt must be canceled. The banks and big bondholders must be expropriated, and these institutions run by the working class in the interests of the working class.

Workers have at their disposal immense strength. The pandemic is bringing out those social forces that are essential to the functioning of society, while at the same time exposing the fact that the insatiable drive for profit by the ruling class is the greatest obstacle to a rational and humane response to the crisis.

The Socialist Equality Party is committed to providing assistance in the formation of rank-and-file committees, while striving to raise the political consciousness of the working class and the understanding that the fight for socialism is now a matter of life and death. We urge transit workers to contact us to take up this struggle.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>