

New York Governor Cuomo reopens economy as COVID-19 infection rate rises across US

By Philip Guelpa
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New York state and, in particular, New York City and its environs have been among the world centers of the COVID-19 pandemic. As of June 19, the state had seen more than 386,000 confirmed cases and close to 25,000 recorded deaths. New York City alone had experienced over half of the reported fatalities. These numbers are likely undercounts.

Due to the imposition of social distancing, stay-at-home orders and other hygienic measures implemented in mid-March, the rate of new infections and deaths has been dramatically reduced. From a peak of over 11,500 reported new cases per day state-wide in mid-April, the rate of new cases had dropped to less than 1,000 on June 6, the culmination of a steady decline during the month of May.

Since then, the daily count of new cases has ranged between 916, on June 12, and 618, on June 17. This reduction by two orders of magnitude is testimony to the effectiveness, absent a vaccine, of the “lockdown” in bringing the pandemic under some degree of control and saving thousands of lives. It does not mean, however, that the danger has passed. Rather, the relatively stable rate of new infections indicates that the limit of the effectiveness of the containment measures has been reached.

Logically, since no other significant factors have changed since March, maintenance of the lockdown would maximize the probability of the ravages of the disease being kept as low as possible until a vaccine or at least an effective treatment was developed. However, under capitalism, logic, not to mention the well-being of the mass of the population, are minor concerns as compared to the accumulation of profit by the wealthy elite.

In New York, the Democratic governor, Andrew Cuomo, has acted in concert with state and municipal officials of both major parties across the country, following the lead of the Trump administration, to “reopen” the economy, a euphemism for forcing workers back to their job sites despite the ever-present danger of a resurgence of infections.

As one of the centers of the pandemic, New York’s economy has taken a major hit and the state budget is projected to record a deficit in excess of \$10 billion this year alone. The state’s financial and corporate elite is desperate to resume business as usual to renew the accumulation of profit.

In early May, the governor announced a “reopening” plan that would gradually lift the restrictions imposed in March to slow the spread of COVID-19. In a recent news conference, Cuomo proclaimed the success of the lockdown measures, calling New York an “anomaly” in relation to other parts of the US. “We have tamed the beast,” he declared.

Cuomo has been a bit more measured in his reopening scheme than other leaders of state governments, where the resurgence of the disease has been quite marked.

He has made much of his reopening plan being “objective” and “scientific” because it employs a panel of “experts.” This panel includes Dr. Michael T. Osterholm, director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota, and Dr. Samir Bhatt, senior lecturer at Imperial College London. Its mandate is to independently judge whether any given region is ready to move to the next stage of reopening. The criteria entail reaching a set of milestones in reduction of disease rates and other variables, including new hospitalizations and deaths. Other benchmarks include a 30 percent hospital bed and intensive care vacancy rate, a weekly average of 30 coronavirus tests per 1,000 residents, and 30 active contact tracers per 100,000 residents.

These criteria are arbitrary and do not meet minimum recommended standards for battling the pandemic. For example, one major plan developed by a group of scholars and published by Harvard University recommends that tests of 2 to 6 percent of the population be administered *per day*. For New York state’s population of 19.4 million, that would require a minimum of 388,000 tests per day.

The Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO) recommends one contact tracer for every 1,000 residents. The Cuomo plan calls for 0.3 per 1,000 residents. Systematic, widespread testing and tracing are widely acknowledged to be key components of any program to control the pandemic. The Cuomo plan’s testing and tracing criteria fall far short.

Nevertheless, based on achievement of these milestones, Cuomo has set forth a four-phase plan of step-wise reductions in restrictions on businesses and other “non-essential” activities, to be implemented according to a set of criteria evaluated in 10 separate regions of the state, each reopening at

its own pace. All phases require the wearing of face coverings in crowded conditions.

New York City was the last region to enter Phase I. It did so on June 8 and is scheduled to enter Phase II on June 22. All others have already reached Phase II, which includes permission for outdoor restaurant dining, opening of hair salons and barber shops, real estate activities, in-store retail, vehicle sales and rentals, repair and cleaning services and commercial building management.

Seven regions of Upstate and Central New York are cleared to enter Phase III. That allows gatherings of up to 25 people, indoor restaurant dining, personal care services, and low-risk youth sports. No regions have yet progressed to Phase IV, which would permit a much wider range of activities involving larger numbers of participants, including arts, entertainment and educational institutions.

On June 12, Cuomo made much of the fact that the state experienced the lowest number of COVID-19 deaths (32) since the initial recorded outbreak of the disease in mid-March, supposedly validating his plan for reopening. Five days later, on June 17, the daily rate was again 32, having dipped to a low of 21 the previous day. This indicates that, as with the rate of new cases, the limits of the ability of previous lockdown measures to control the pandemic had been reached. The daily death rate curve peaked at 799 on April 8, with an anomalous spike of 952 on May 5.

However, the death rate is a “trailing indicator” of the progress of the disease, reflecting what happened several weeks prior in terms of initial infections. Since June 6, the daily rate of new infections has stabilized in the range of between approximately 600 and 900, still a non-negligible number.

Despite all the pseudo-scientific mumbo jumbo about “flattening the curve” and a “measured” reopening, the bottom line is that the virus is still circulating in the population. The only reason that the infection and death rates were brought down so dramatically was the implementation of stay-at-home and related hygienic measures.

There is no rational basis for believing that lifting those actions, without a vaccine, effective treatment or, at the very minimum, comprehensive and frequent testing, contact tracing and quarantining of infected individuals—none of which are in place—will not lead to a massive resurgence of the disease. That is already being seen in multiple states where reopening has been substantially implemented. Hundreds of thousands, if not millions more will die.

In a pre-emptive move to evade responsibility for the predicable resurgence of the pandemic when the consequences of his reopening measures become evident, Cuomo has sought to lay the blame in advance on people not following the rules.

At the same time, Cuomo has acknowledged that in addition to the continuing circulation of the virus within the state as a reservoir for a renewed spread of infections, lifting the lockdown measures in New York will expose the population to

exposure from external sources.

“As usual, we have to stay smart and continue proceeding with caution,” he said. “Look around the nation and look at the spikes other states are experiencing—we’re not in a vacuum.”

He continued: “It is our behavior, nothing more, nothing less” that determines the outcome of reopening. “If we have a high number of violations of the policy which is tantamount to a high likelihood of the spread of the virus, and the local governments are not monitoring policing, doing the compliance, yes, there is a very real possibility that we would roll back the reopening in those areas. The only alternative would be to pause the entire reopening.”

Cuomo has indicated that he is considering imposing a 14-day quarantine requirement on all those traveling to New York from Florida, one of the nation’s current hot spots, as if such measures would have any significant effect on the spread of the virus.

The fact is that millions are being forced to return to work in New York and elsewhere under highly dangerous conditions, without proper safeguards (having to use mass transit to commute to work, for example) due to extreme economic pressure, which is already causing a resurgence of infections in many states. Blaming the victims for having to make life-and-death decisions under circumstances over which they have no control is the height of ruling class arrogance.

Cuomo has repeatedly and adamantly refused to consider raising taxes on wealthy New Yorkers, the state that is home to Wall Street, in order to provide economic support to workers and their families suffering extreme financial distress caused by the pandemic.

Andrew Cuomo, Donald Trump, the entire Democratic and Republican parties and the whole financial and corporate elite which they represent, aided and abetted by the trade union bureaucracies, are all equally guilty of pushing the working class toward mass slaughter. As the *World Socialist Web Site* has repeatedly said, only the working class itself, organized independently to implement the socialist transformation of society, can avert this disaster.

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