HIV Activists March in NYC to Protest “Death by 1,000 Musk Cuts”

“Tesla = AIDS”: The action marked the 38th anniversary of ACT UP, the activist group whose lifesaving HIV triumphs are now threatened.

April 1, 2025 By Trent Straube

“Hey, hey! Ho, ho! Elon Musk has got to go!” “Put him in a K-hole.” “Medicaid cuts killed me.” “Death by DOGE.” “Trans people exist. Billionaires shouldn’t.” “Telsa = AIDS.”

So declared the chants and handmade posters at the “Death by 1,000 Musk Cuts” protest Saturday, March 29, in Manhattan, setting the tone for the day’s action. Spearheaded by HIV activists, the demonstration began at the AIDS Memorial in Greenwich Village and ended with a die-in at a Tesla showroom. The action drew over 2,000 people, according to ACT UP/NY, one of the organizers, and included HealthGAP, Housing Works, Metro New York Health Care for All, the NYDocs Coalition, Physicians for a National Health Program, Rise and Resist, Planet Over Profit and others.

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The protest also commemorated the 38th anniversary of ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), the legendary group of activists who demanded the research, funding and respect that led to effective HIV treatment and lifesaving service programs across the globe, thus altering the course of the AIDS epidemic and helping to transform an HIV diagnosis from a death sentence to a chronic condition.

It's fitting that AIDS advocates would take to the streets in 2025, as the progress they fought for—along with the lives of people living with and at risk for HIV—are now threatened by federal budget cuts at the hands of President Donald Trump and his billionaire aide Elon Musk and his Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) wreckers.

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A post shared by ACT UP NY (@actupny)

Perhaps no slogan better encapsulates the first two decades of the HIV epidemic than "Silence = Death." (Read about the history of the "Silence = Death" poster here.) Saturday's demonstration updated the iconic rallying cry to "Tesla = AIDS."



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An ACT UP NY social media post explains the connections between Musk, Tesla, AIDS and death:

> “Tesla equals AIDS. The brand, the board, and the shareholders are all platforming an AIDS genocidaire as CEO. Elon Musk is no longer just the world’s richest billionaire — he’s the main driver behind the global collapse of HIV/AIDS care. He’s responsible for the sadistic, homophobic dismantling of PEPFAR [the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, which funds global HIV efforts], and every Model S on the road is now a billboard for AIDS and death. Shareholders should be ashamed. Every stock option is a stake in needless suffering for people living with HIV around the world.
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> “Through DOGE, Musk has dismantled PEPFAR—the most successful global HIV/AIDS program in history. For over two decades, it represented the best of what U.S. power could do: it was bipartisan, deeply human, and lifesaving. But under Musk’s influence and the cowardice of compliant politicians, this lifeline was torn apart in the name of “efficiency.” This wasn’t streamlining—it was engineered cruelty, infused with old-fashioned homophobia and contempt.
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> “PEPFAR saved over 25 million lives. It built AIDS clinics, stocked pharmacies, trained care workers, and gave millions of people in the world’s poorest countries a future, safe from AIDS. Now, thanks to a billionaire’s ego and a nation’s indifference, millions of people living with HIV are at risk of viral resurgence or worse, and are now facing the most hostile U.S. government since the early years of the AIDS crisis. Silence is back in power, and it’s deafening.”

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Similarly, a call to action issued before the march spelled out today's political unrest and the need to protect our health care. It read in part:

> "ACT UP (AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power) commemorates their 38th anniversary by holding a rally, march and die-in to protest the billions of dollars in healthcare funding and lifesaving medications frozen or cut by Trump, Musk and RFK.
>
> "In Donald Trump's first 100 days, he and Elon Musk have frozen or slashed billions of dollars in international AIDS funding through PEPFAR and USAID.
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> "They've fired thousands of workers from the NIH, CDC, FDA, VA, and other agencies that we rely on to stay healthy and prevent current and future diseases. And they are currently threatening to slash Medicaid and Medicare, endangering the lives of roughly 140 million Americans who rely on them.
>
> "We mark the 38th Anniversary of ACT UP in love and anger at the deaths of our family and friends and millions around the world. We'll rally at the NYC AIDS Memorial and then march to the Tesla Showroom for a die-in.

“ACT UP! Fight Back! Fight AIDS!”



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A post shared by ACT UP NY (@actupny)

Following Saturday’s demonstration, several organizers posted a thank-you to participants, noting: “Today, we reminded the world: the extremist, anti-democratic agenda coming out of Washington will not be met silently—we will fight back! We will ACT UP!—Always!”

For related news in POZ, read:

- “Trump White House Terminates Hundreds of Research Grants, Many on HIV and Minorities,”
- “New Study Highlights the Potential Impact of Funding Cuts to the HIV Response,”
- “HIV Service Providers Prepare for Federal Funding Cuts,”
- “Eight Countries Could Soon Run Out of HIV Meds Due to U.S. Funding Cuts, Says WHO” and
- “CDC’s Division of HIV Prevention Could Face Reorganization or Elimination.”

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