

Chicago Public Schools and Chicago Teachers Union advance deadly school reopening plans

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To prevent the reopening of schools, Chicago educators must organize independently of the CTU through the formation of a Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which will unite educators, parents, students and the broader working class, to prepare strike action to close all schools and nonessential workplaces. We urge all those who want to join this struggle to send us your contact information today.

In announcing their plans reopening K-12 schools in Chicago, the Democratic city government led by Mayor Lori Lightfoot and the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) are on a collision course with tens of thousands of educators, as well as parents, students and families.

On December 14, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) announced the hiring of 2,000 school workers to assist in the full reopening of the nation's third largest school district. Some principals have reported to local media that one-quarter to one-half of teachers and staff may not return to schools next month due to the unacceptable health risks to all involved.

Earlier this month, CPS announced its homicidal school reopening plan amid the deepest surge of the pandemic in Illinois and across the United States. Teachers and staff for pre-Kindergarten, moderate and intensive special education cluster programs are scheduled to return to class January 4, while students for these classes are set to return on January 11. Teachers and staff for grades K-8 are to report to schools January 25, with students for these grades scheduled to be back in school February 1.

Teachers reporting to work in schools will be responsible for simultaneously teaching students in-person in the classroom, as well as those who opt to stay home and learn online. This "hybrid" system, as teachers nationwide have been reporting for many

months, is the worst of all possible situations, and leaves everyone dangerously exposed to the virus. Further, splitting their time and attention between in-person and online students is in part why many additional staff are needed, underscoring that quality of education is not the priority in reopening the schools.

The push to reopen schools in Chicago and across the US takes place as the coronavirus pandemic spreads uncontrollably across much of the country, hitting the Midwest especially hard in recent months. The state of Illinois is nearing 100,000 cases of COVID-19, with over 16,000 dead this year and over 100 dying per day for the last 12 days. In countries like Germany, the reopening of schools has led to a massive spike in COVID-19 infections, provoking enormous social anger and protest.

Chicago's current seven-day average COVID-19 test positivity rate is 11.3 percent. Hospital bed availability is critically low, with intensive care unit (ICU) bed availability at 22.8 percent and hospital bed availability at 16.2 percent.

Expecting that numerous teachers will be out on medical leave or get sick as schools reopen in January, CPS is seeking to hire 1,000 "cadre substitutes" and low-wage, part-time classroom assistants.

The "cadre substitute" will be a dues-paying member of the CTU. The classroom assistant is a \$15 per hour position, including in-class supervision, health screenings and social distance monitoring. For risking their lives, they will be paid barely above minimum wage and work 6.75 hours a day, with an unpaid 45 minute lunch break.

On December 3, CPS CEO Janice Jackson announced that teachers who do not have medical exceptions and who do not report to school buildings will be fired, stating, "Teachers don't have a choice of opting in or

out... If they don't show up to work, it will be handled the same way it's handled in any other situation where an employee fails to come to work."

Those that do return to school buildings face a "learning curve and heavy learning demands," Jackson said.

For her role in this social crime—which is aligned with the incoming Biden administration's plans to fully reopen schools and the economy—Jackson was awarded a 15.4 percent pay increase, or \$40,000 annually, at the December school board meeting. This brought her annual salary to \$300,000. Jackson's name has been floated as a potential pick for US Secretary of Education in the Biden administration.

Seeking to cover up the extreme dangers posed by reopening schools and to suppress the growing opposition among teachers and families, CTU has made no plans for a strike vote and is working overtime to win an agreement from the right-wing city government to try to force teachers back to school.

In acts of legal skulduggery, two union motions for injunctive relief filed with the Illinois Education Labor Relations Board have been denied, challenging the union's right to negotiate workplace safety. But the union only aims to maintain its seat at the table and is working to negotiate terms of return that are friendly to CPS. Reports indicate that the union and CPS have met 43 times since June to work out a reopening plan.

CTU's official plan is premised on the lie that schools can be safely opened while the pandemic continues to spread uncontrolled. At a December 17 press conference, Sharkey explained that what CTU will call a "safe" rate of COVID-19 infection is fully negotiable with CPS. In other words, the 3 percent positivity rate in the CTU's list of demands is a starting point for bargaining with the lives and health of teachers, students and the community.

A similar standard was established in New York City and has been arbitrarily scrapped by Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio with the fulsome approval of the UFT.

At a CTU delegates meeting in November, CTU President Jesse Sharkey tried to demoralize opposition, telling teachers they could not fight to continue remote learning until a vaccine has been widely administered. He stated, "If we keep saying no, it can leave us isolated, and our members will be demoralized, because it would appear we are not bargaining and we keep

saying no."

Teachers should reject the CTU's anti-scientific approach with the contempt it deserves. Their collusion with CPS is the latest in a long line of betrayals, including the shutdown of powerful teachers' strikes in 2012 and 2019, the latter of which was the longest Chicago teachers' strike in more than 30 years and resulted in a concessions contract.

Independent life-saving actions by teachers are critical now. Teachers in Chicago must follow the lead of teachers in New York City, Michigan, Texas, San Diego and other cities and states, as well as autoworkers and logistics workers across the country, and form a Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to begin coordinating mass action today.

Sign up today to get involved at wsws.org/edsafety



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact