

Chicago officials refuse teacher accommodations in order to force school reopenings

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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 Chicago educators and workers to sign up to join this struggle at wsws.org/edsafety/!

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) continues to plow ahead with its plan to reopen schools in the third-largest district in the country, even as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to rage throughout the city. Entirely in line with the incoming Biden administration's national strategy for reopening schools and the wider economy, the CPS plan calls for in-person learning to resume for pre-K and many special education students starting January 11 and for grades K-8 by February 1.

As things stand, about 5,800 of the district's roughly 7,000 pre-K and special education teachers and educators are being ordered to report to their school buildings on Monday, January 4, with K-8 teachers following on January 25. CPS CEO Janice Jackson has threatened teachers who do not report with firing, stating on December 3, "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."

The latest indication of the seriousness with which Chicago officials, including Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot, are taking the initiative to reopen schools is the announcement by CPS itself that 58 percent of requests by educators to be exempted from teaching in-person on health grounds have been denied so far. There is little doubt that the push to reopen schools in a city which is a major bastion of the Democratic Party has been worked

out in concert with the incoming Biden administration, in order to shore up the financial markets.

Roughly 2,000 out of the 7,000 educators in the first group applied for exemption on medical or child-care grounds, even with the high likelihood of being allowed to take only unpaid leave by CPS. While nearly all those who reported having an underlying medical condition themselves were approved, totaling 527, only 19 percent of requests due to a household member's medical condition were approved, along with just 11.5 percent of requests based on a need for child care. An additional 4 percent of these requests still awaits decisions, as do all requests from K-8 teachers.

Educators have every reason to oppose the CPS reopening plans, despite the intense pressure being placed on them by the ruling class. According to Chicago's own COVID-19 dashboard, the city's positivity rate stands at 8.3 percent, with some working class neighborhoods registering as high as 17.8 percent, indicating widespread community transmission of the virus.

Even more significantly, the number of confirmed cases per day remains extremely high, with the case rate per 100,000 people currently at 35.9, close to the peak of 38.3 per 100,000 seen on May 3. The state as a whole, which boasts a slightly lower positivity rate than Chicago, saw 215 more deaths on Tuesday, bringing the total to 17,811, the sixth highest figure in the US.

In spite of the absurd claim by CPS that the school reopening plan is safe, the city has maintained it will reconsider its plans only if the rate at which cases in the city double is under 18 days, a completely arbitrary metric that assumes no significant measures will be undertaken to halt the pandemic or get it under control.

Contrary to the media blitz about the supposed safety of schools, there are currently 11 outbreaks at reopened

schools throughout the state, even with the limited levels of reporting and the high threshold of five cases required for an official outbreak designation.

Working class parents, who in many cases already face a real danger of contracting the disease from their workplaces, have largely decided not to send their children back into schools under these conditions. Only 32 percent of those parents classified as low-income indicated they would send their children back, and only 37 percent overall. According to a report from WBEZ, some schools expect to see only one student when classes resume, and others just 10 percent of their total enrollment.

It is also very likely the actual number of students who show up will be even lower than these figures indicate, as CPS required parents to opt in for in-person learning weeks ago, giving only those students the option to move to in-person learning when they choose. Many will likely conclude, as the CPS plans have become more clear, that the conditions under which in-person learning will be conducted will be both unsafe and inimical to education, with no recess, no manipulatives for young children, and teachers forced to conduct lessons simultaneously in-person and online, just as a start.

In recognition of the extreme danger of the CPS plan, a number of local school councils (LSCs) have adopted resolutions opposing it and calling for schools to remain remote until vaccines are widely available. The LSC at Vaughn Elementary voted unanimously to call for a delay in reopening “until it is safe to return to in-person learning as determined by CPS and the Vaughn school community.”

Even stronger was the statement issued by the LSC at Brentano Math and Science Academy, which declared, “We reject this plan, which is not in the best interest of the children of Chicago. We cannot reopen this way now: when it is more dangerous than ever, when we are so close to the end. We will stay apart, to guide this school and care for its children, until we can return together in celebration and in mourning.”

Despite this striving by educators and parents to formulate a joint plan of action to stop the reopening through the limited organizational vehicle of the LSCs, the biggest obstacle to uniting workers in a joint struggle is the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), which is working closely with the Democrats to stifle opposition and prevent the outbreak of mass struggle.

Even with school reopening imminent, CTU leaders, including President Jesse Sharkey, a leading member of

the now-defunct International Socialist Organization (ISO), have refused to call for a strike. Sharkey shot down a motion at the last union House of Delegates meeting on December 9 calling for an emergency delegates' meeting in the event of an unfavorable ruling from the Illinois Educational Labor Relations Board concerning the union's accusation of unfair labor practices on the part of CPS.

Instead, the CTU, like all the unions, has sought to isolate teachers and leave them to fight by themselves. This was made very clear in a recent post on the CTU website by the union's deputy general counsel, Thad Goodchild, which tells educators to make the decision to refuse to work under as isolated individuals and promises them nothing if they are fired by CPS.

As the document says, “The CTU will back any and all members threatened with discipline for refusing to work under unsafe conditions. We're not saying this is without risk, and we're saying that we only win if we do this together, in unity, and that every single member will get the Union's full support in winning back pay and beating back discipline.”

The position that teachers are basically on their own was reiterated by Sharkey in a meeting held by the CTU Wednesday evening, in which he responded to the question “Where do we go from here?” by saying, “CTU has a set of reasonable demands. We hope to amplify those demands in public. We also have a legal strategy, and will work to pressure elected officials. Beyond that, members may have to take workplace actions.”

Another educator asked for leadership from the union: “Are we going in on the 4th or are we staying home and working remotely? What are we doing to stop us from going in person?” In response, CTU organizer Jim Cavallero said, “We are building solidarity among our members to not return and for the rest of our members to pledge to take escalating action if CPS tries to institute consequences.”

This cowardly strategy, entirely in line with the interests of the ruling class, must be opposed through the formation of a Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, an independent organization capable of leading the struggle against school reopenings. Contact us today to get involved!



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