

Chicago schools press ahead with reopening despite wide opposition among teachers and parents

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To prevent the reopening of schools, Chicago educators must organize independently of the CTU through the formation of an Illinois 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 attend and help build this public meeting on Thursday at 7 pm CST to form an Illinois Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, and to send us your contact information today .

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) is pressing ahead with its plan to reopen schools for in-person learning, with many Pre-K and special education teachers reporting to schools on Monday despite wide opposition among parents and educators. The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) has resisted calling for any joint action as it tries to pressure the administration of Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot into working with the union to craft a reopening policy it can sell to its members and the wider working class.

The Lightfoot administration is pushing aggressively to reopen schools in the face of predictions that the month of January will see 115,000 deaths or more from COVID-19 in the US, an enormous increase from the record 77,000 deaths in December. According to the City of Chicago's own COVID-19 dashboard, the city's positivity rate is 10.2 percent, up from 8.6 percent the previous week. While the number of confirmed cases in the city has fallen slightly from the previous week, there has been a substantial falloff in testing over the holidays, with the number of daily tests roughly half what they were just before Thanksgiving.

Even with a right-wing media blitz claiming schools can be reopened safely, the deadly reality of the pandemic is clear to the majority of working class Chicagoans. According to numbers released by the district, just 23 percent of families indicated they would opt for in-person learning this year. The number of students who actually report is likely to be far less than that, as CPS previously stated that students who chose to opt-in would be able to continue online until families feel safe returning.

This means that while educators will be back in schools, most of their students will continue learning from home. However, in addition to teaching those students who are learning remotely, teachers will also have to deliver instruction and modify lessons at the same time for a small number of students in the classrooms, degrading the quality of education for both groups of students.

This backwards model—which endangers all those present in the classroom—has already been implemented in districts and states across the US, and is widely loathed by educators.

Chicago teachers have been subjected to a media barrage over the past week, falsely claiming that reopening schools can be done safely, which contradicts numerous major scientific studies. This ludicrous position was even put forward by a group of 17 physicians who were given a prime spot in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, part-owned by the Chicago Federation of Labor, to bolster the reopening plan.

In a contribution entirely lacking in references to scientific studies or papers, the doctors wrote, “For example, we have discovered that in-school spread of COVID-19 is rare when proper precautions are taken. Furthermore, we know now that children, and especially young children of elementary school age, are much less likely to transmit infection to adults than the other way around.”

As a matter of fact, according to a recent article in *Nature*, the second-most effective intervention worldwide to reduce the spread of COVID-19 is “the closure of educational institutions.” Moreover, many of the early studies indicating low spread in schools were based on research conducted when learning was done remotely and in the context of widespread closures and shelter-in-place orders.

This is to say nothing of the emergence of the B.1.1.7 variant of the virus, which has now been officially registered in Colorado, California and Florida, and which is 50 to 70 percent more transmissible. According to a UK government adviser, the new variant is “transmitted more readily in younger age groups as well. It is going to be very difficult to keep it under control without much tighter social restrictions. We know that a person between 12 and 16 is seven times more likely than others in a household to bring the infection into a household.”

The doctors writing in the *Sun-Times* also pointed to the supposedly safe reopening of Chicago's private Catholic schools. Aside from the obvious class differences between many CPS students and those of private, Catholic schools, the fact is a number of Catholic schools did close due to outbreaks. Moreover, even a cursory look at the Illinois Department of Public Health's own website shows there have been six active outbreaks within the last 30 days alone at Illinois schools, including private schools.

Further, historical data shows that across Illinois there were around 650 cases of COVID-19 among school-aged children up to the age of 17 for the week ending July 11. This number rose continuously with the spread of the pandemic until it began to spike at the end of October as schools and businesses around the state began reopening, reaching a height of over 9,000 cases for the week ending November 14. The last week for which data is reported, December 19, indicates there were over 4,400 cases. In other words, cases among school-aged children have tracked with cases in the community at large.

In response to the obvious danger, teachers are looking for a way to fight, with many angry that CTU has not called for a strike or made a clear call for joint action by educators and other workers. The union has circulated a pledge letter refusing duties that endanger health, which has more than 11,600 signatures.

Many teachers are following the union's advice, informing their principals they intend to avail themselves of the right to stay home until conditions are safe, despite previous threats from the district and no guarantee from the union that they will not be fired. In reply, according to the union, teachers have been sent the following response from school leaders:

"Without an approved accommodation or leave of absence, all Pre-K and Cluster staff members are required to report to work in-person starting on January 4th as previously directed by CPS. Consequently, your request to continue remote instruction cannot be granted and you are expected to report for in-person instruction starting on Monday, January 4, 2021. If you do not report for in-person instruction starting on January 4th, your absence from the school building will be unauthorized and CPS will take appropriate next steps."

Other educators, such as those at Brentano Math and Science Academy, showed up to their schools but refused to go inside. Opting instead to bundle up and teach outside even with the sub-freezing temperatures, they highlighted the danger of aerosol-based spread of COVID-19 in the poorly ventilated conditions prevailing in Chicago schools.

In response to the lack of buy-in from parents and other workers and the increasing resolve of teachers and Chicago workers to fight the reopening, including the statements issued by 14 Local School Councils calling for a halt to school reopenings, 33 of Chicago's 50 aldermen penned a letter to Lightfoot and CPS CEO Janice Jackson calling for the district to negotiate with the union.

Despite this opposition from two-thirds of the City Council, Jackson's eight-page response letter doubled-down on the district's position, reasserting CPS' absurd safety claims, including the arbitrary metric that they will only consider school closures if the rate at which cases in the city double becomes less than 18 days.

An article written by doctors with the Chicago Department of Public Health, including its commissioner Allison Arwady, makes clear the politically motivated character of the decision to reopen schools. They simply write, "Metrics such as citywide test positivity used by other large urban public school systems have not been proven to improve safety and increase the risk of interrupting education. Most recently, New York City has decided to reopen elementary school and special education and discounted the

meaningfulness of the previous metrics."

Indeed, New York City's Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio and the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) have also pressed ahead with school reopenings, despite more than tripling the previously agreed-upon threshold to close schools.

The real reason for Lightfoot's and Jackson's strident position was made clear from a comment by alderman Carlos Ramirez-Rosa, a member of the DSA, who noted during a CTU press conference from Brentano, "The Latino caucus met with Mayor Lori Lightfoot some weeks ago, maybe a few months ago. We said mayor, why do you want to do this? She said, one, I'm hearing from employers that they want their employees back in the workplace, two, I'm hearing from downtown businesses that they don't have any customers and three, because I'm worried about the kids."

That Ramirez-Rosa waited until now to reveal Lightfoot's statements underscoring her adherence to the ruling class's herd immunity policy is an indictment of the DSA and the unions.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has explained numerous times, the drive to reopen schools follows from the bipartisan decision to hand over trillions to Wall Street and the major corporations through the CARES Act. In order to deepen the process of profit extraction, corporations require all workers back on the job, which means that parents need somewhere to send their children.

However, far from opposing the reopening in principle, the aldermen and CTU are primarily concerned that the rampant state of the pandemic will produce a disaster and a response from workers outside of their control. This is exactly what is necessary. Teachers who want to fight the school reopening policy need an independent organization to prosecute their struggle, and to demand that schools remain online until vaccines are widely available. There must be a vast infusion of resources to provide high quality remote learning and ensure that all parents can stay home with their children. We urge all Chicago educators, parents and students to attend and help build this public meeting on Thursday at 7 pm CST to form an Illinois Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee.



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