

Chicago Teachers Union leader partied in Puerto Rico as teachers were herded back into schools

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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 p.m. CST to form an Illinois Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, and to send us your contact information today.

On December 31, Chicago news station WGN published social media posts by Chicago Teachers Union Area Vice President Sarah Chambers enjoying a vacation in Puerto Rico just days before thousands of teachers were forced back into dangerous school buildings under Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot's reopening plan.

The incident revealed the essence of the CTU, which falsely claims to "represent" more than 30,000 educators in the nation's third-largest school district. It is an outfit run by upper-middle-class functionaries who are completely insulated from the disastrous consequences their actions have and continue to produce for rank-and-file teachers and working class families in the city.

In addition to poolside selfies from her Caribbean vacation, Chambers posted messages about the restaurant meals she was looking forward to in Old San Juan, the tourist section of the impoverished island's capital. Puerto Rico has had 127,000 people contract COVID-19 and 1,200 deaths. Using the account name Sarah4Justice, Chambers, who was there along with CTU grievance coordinator Sara Echevarria, created posts oblivious to these conditions, not to mention the struggle of Puerto Rican teachers against the impact of hurricanes, earthquakes and savage austerity.

In Chicago, district officials have ordered all pre-K through eighth grade teachers without approved medical exceptions back into buildings this month, regardless of their family's health conditions, and threatened those who do not return with dismissal. This is despite a citywide infection rate of over 10 percent. Infection rates are closer to 20 percent in working class neighborhoods where low-wage workers are forced to work, rely on mass transit and live in large, multigenerational households.

To make matters worse, public health experts believe the new,

more virulent strain of the virus, which spreads particularly fast among young people, is already in Chicago, sparking the latest surge in cases. On Sunday, Chicago resident Arnold Herrera, a 19-year-old with no prior health problems, died of the disease.

Under these conditions, there is immense opposition among educators and parents to the deadly reopening policy. More than half of the 2,100 teachers and 40 percent of the support staff instructed to return to work Monday did not return, according to district officials. On Sunday evening, CPS CEO Janice Jackson admitted in her letter to Chicago aldermen that only 37 percent of parents of pre-K through eighth grade and special education students have stated intention to return for in-person learning.

Chambers' social media posts further undermined the already tattered credibility of the CTU, which continues to posture as an opponent of Lightfoot's forced reopening even as it blocks collective action by teachers against the murderous policy. In an effort at damage control, Chambers, who at first defended her actions, issued a statement of contrition and announced she would "step back" from the CTU executive board, at least temporarily.

"I understand that was insensitive and wrong of me to go on this trip for winter break and for me to share photos of it at a time when thousands of my union sisters and brothers—and the families we serve—are refraining from travel or making only essential plans outside of the home. I deeply regret my actions and I fully understand why many are upset," her Facebook said. She added, "In order to show my contrition, and not to be a distraction, I will deactivate all of my social media accounts and step back from the Chicago Teachers Union executive board."

Corporate and far-right news media predictably seized upon Chambers' posts to try to smear teachers by equating them with the complacent and corrupt CTU officials. According to the right-wing gutter press, teachers' opposition to a return to in-person learning is not driven by concern for the well-being of educators, children and their parents, but a desire for more time off. The right-wing campaign, however, has failed to undermine support for teachers who are struggling, along with parents, with inadequate resources for online learning, the dangers of the pandemic and the indifference of school and city officials.

The right-wing effort to equate teachers with the CTU is as grotesquely false as the claims by Chambers and the rest of the CTU leaders that "membership controls the union." In reality, the

Chambers incident is only the latest example of the enormous class gulf that exists between the CTU and rank-and-file teachers.

It has been more than a decade since the CORE (Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators) faction, made up of members of the defunct International Socialist Organization (ISO), the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and other pseudo-left groups, took over the CTU based on rhetoric about “social justice unionism” and “union democracy.” Chambers, a longtime co-chair of CORE, calls herself a “socialist,” traveled to Venezuela in 2019 with a delegation of Chicago teachers, and is regularly interviewed in *Labor Notes* and *Jacobin*, the semi-official publication of the DSA.

The installation of Chambers, former ISO leader and now-CTU President Jesse Sharkey, and other middle class pseudo-left elements has done nothing to change the anti-working class character of the CTU. Over the last decade it has played a central role in the restructuring of public education in Chicago and assisting the Democratic Party in suppressing opposition to school closures and the expansion of for-profit charter schools, along with the explosion of social inequality and police killings. The CTU has been a trailblazer for the career opportunities of other “left union reformers” in Los Angeles, New York and other cities.

In every case, they have waged a war, not against the Democratic Party and corporate school privatizers, but against the class consciousness of the working class, echoing claims of the Democrats that the essential division in America is race, not class. Like the CTU, the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA), the Oakland Education Association (OEA) and other unions have betrayed strikes, collaborated in the attacks on teachers and public education, and colluded in the murderous back-to-school policy. In December, Sharkey, the presidents of the UTLA, OEA and other unions penned a love letter to President-elect Joe Biden that covered up his support for forcing teachers back into unsafe schools.

While feigning opposition to Lightfoot’s plans, the CTU has opposed any strike action, leaving teachers to fight on their own. It has filed impotent legal complaints, called on teachers to sign a petition against unsafe conditions, and urged individual teachers to call in absent, leaving them vulnerable to management retaliation.

At a press conference Tuesday, CTU President Sharkey said nothing about the district’s threats to fire teachers for unexcused absences. The reopening, he said, would not work if “the district simply continues to dictate to us,” and admitted the city was not willing to commit to a public health metric for reopening, like a threshold COVID-19 positivity rate.

He then said the CTU made three additional offers to the city on a return-to-work plan to sell to teachers, including a delayed start of classes until teachers receive a first dose of the vaccine, with an extension of the school year into the summer; the return of only those teachers and students who volunteer to do in-person learning; or the resumption of in-person learning with mass testing of all teachers and students, all representing unacceptable public health risks.

This is the same modus operandi used by teacher unions in New York City, Washington D.C. and other cities to reopen dangerous schools. Whatever the phony rhetoric, when it comes to sending

teachers back to infected schools, the CTU and other unions are on the other side of the barricade. They are aligned with Biden, who has rejected any lockdowns and insisted that all schools be open over the next few months so the parents of schoolchildren can be sent back to work to produce corporate profit.

That is why educators must take matters into their own hands by joining the national network of Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees, which are organized independently of the corporatist unions, to protect their lives. These committees, which have already been established in New York, Michigan, Pennsylvania, California, Texas and other states, are fighting to unite teachers with the broadest sections of the working class to shut down schools and nonessential production and fully compensate workers and small business owners.

Teachers confront a political battle against the Democratic Party, which no less than the Republican Party speaks for Wall Street. After handing trillions to the major corporations, both parties plan to gut public education and other vital services. The fight to close unsafe schools and defend lives must be combined with a political struggle against both corporate-controlled parties and a socialist alternative to the capitalist profit system. To fight for this, we urge teachers to get more information and join the Socialist Equality Party.

All educators, school workers, parents and students who support this initiative should join our Facebook group and contact us today to establish local rank-and-file committees in your school and neighborhood. We urge you to attend an online meeting on Thursday at 7 p.m. CST to form an Illinois Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. We will also be hosting a national call-in meeting at 1 p.m. EST this Saturday, January 9. We urge you to send us your contact information today and make plans to attend this important meeting.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact