

As students return to Chicago schools, educators face battle against Democrats and the CTU

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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 send us your contact information today.

Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot and officials at Chicago Public Schools (CPS) continue their aggressive push for in-person learning in the face of widespread opposition among educators and parents. The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), far from opposing the public health disaster that will occur if schools are reopened before widespread vaccination is available, has simply demanded that union officials be brought in as junior partners in managing schools.

It is currently unclear how many of the 6,000 Pre-K and special education students eligible to return to classrooms Monday will actually show up at school buildings. Out of roughly 2,000 teachers ordered to report last Monday, half refused, and out of the 5,800 total educators ordered back, only 60 percent reported. Just recently, 147 school nurses signed a letter opposing the plan as unsafe.

In the latest threat issued to teachers and staff who refuse to report to school buildings, CPS CEO Janice Jackson warned Friday that they will be considered “absent without leave” and have their pay docked. Further, their access to district computer systems will be cut off, preventing them from continuing to teach remotely.

Such a move would mean these teachers’ students would have to be assigned to other teachers, exacerbating the already-existing difficulties with remote learning that are the consequence of overcrowded classrooms

throughout the district. It would also add to the immense difficulties teachers and students face with CPS’ plan to require teachers in school buildings to teach in-person and remote students at the same time.

Against scientific research published in *Nature Human Behavior*, which indicates that closing schools is the second most effective intervention that can be carried out to slow the spread of COVID-19 in the community, Lightfoot and the Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH) have continued to insist that schools can be reopened safely.

This is also despite the admission by CDPH Medical Director Dr. Marielle Fricchione that the new COVID-19 variant, B.1.1.7, is “likely circulating already” in Chicago. New research suggests the new variant spreads much more quickly, and a report from Imperial College London indicates it may spread more easily among young people than previous variants. Notably, on Sunday Lightfoot extended the city’s stay-at-home advisory through January 22 in response to “a sustained level of COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations.”

In the face of this mounting evidence of the danger of reopening schools, city and school district officials have touted a study by CDPH published in *The Journal of Public Health Management & Practice*, in which they attempt to give a scientific-sounding cover to their reopening plan. However, any objective examination of this article, a so-called “Practice Brief Report” with lower publication standards than would be expected of research articles, would conclude it is weak and politically motivated.

The centerpiece of CDPH’s argument is a study conducted in collaboration with the Catholic schools of the Archdiocese of Chicago, which brought almost 20,000 of its roughly 78,000 students back for in-person learning

in August. Based entirely on reports of infections from the Archdiocese itself, which has a heavy financial incentive to keep its tuition-paying students in classrooms, the data systematically under-represents the role of open schools in the spread of COVID-19 and ignores the reality that many Catholic schools have closed at various points throughout the past months due to outbreaks.

Nonetheless, even with this suspect source of data, the report says there were 59 cases at 31 schools between August 17 and October 1, a time period when around 7,000 cases were reported among school-aged children throughout the state, many of whom had returned to in-person learning at least part-time. Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) contact tracing data also suggests schools are the second-most common location of infection behind business/retail.

The real concern of the article is revealed in the authors' concluding remarks, which discount the use of test positivity rates. They 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."

Contrary to their fraudulent statements, the concern of Lightfoot and the corporate elites that run Chicago is not at all that the city's working class students will fall behind academically.

The state General Assembly is presently debating whether to repeal restrictions on CTU's ability to bargain over classroom conditions and other matters, which if passed would require CPS to come to an agreement with the union before reopening. In response, Lightfoot penned a letter to state senators, noting that such a repeal "at this critical time would impair our efforts to reopen Chicago Public Schools and jeopardize our fiscal and educational gains."

In other words, what Lightfoot is concerned about, in line with the Trump and incoming Biden administrations, is to get students back into classrooms so their parents can go back to work.

Even with mounting opposition among educators and parents to the reopening of schools, the CTU has continued to steadfastly oppose the call for a strike or any type of coordinated action among educators to put a stop to it.

On a Friday Zoom meeting with parents, an anonymous attendee posed the simple question "Will there be a strike?" CTU executive board member Chris Baehrend answered, "We certainly hope not! With parents' continued support, we believe we can win a safer return

without a strike, although we may have to prepare for one."

The call for a "safer" return and not a "safe" return is significant, and entirely of a piece with the latest proposals that CTU has made to the school district in order to sell a plan to teachers. These proposals, which would all make the ongoing public health disaster even worse, include waiting to reopen until teachers get just a first dose of the vaccine and then extending the school year into the summer, and even offering to reopen schools with "volunteers" and mass testing.

At the Friday meeting, CTU President Jesse Sharkey, a former leading member of the pseudo-left International Socialist Organization (ISO) stated, "We're going to keep working hard at the table," and added, "Hopefully we can get a compromise and come up with a safe way to do this."

Rather than organizing educators and other workers to oppose the reopening plan on a mass basis, Sharkey and the rest of the union bureaucracy are working hard behind the scenes with their allies in the Democratic Party to force Lightfoot to come to an agreement giving the CTU a seat at the table. The fundamental role of the CTU is to help manage the ruling class's deep political and economic crisis by shutting down any struggles which might threaten the profit system.

The unions' longstanding hostility to teachers and other workers finds acute expression in their collusion with the ruling class campaign to throw them back into classrooms in the midst of the pandemic. The life-and-death struggle confronting Chicago educators underscores the real need to join educators across the country and internationally who are organizing independently of the unions and the capitalist political parties. We urge all Chicago educators to get involved with the formation of an Illinois Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee by signing up today at wsws.org/edsafety !



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact