

Chicago Teachers Union accepts further reopenings as virus outbreaks erupt in schools

Alexander Fangmann
15 January 2021

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. This committee 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.

Following the reopening of Chicago Public Schools (CPS) to in-person instruction on Monday, reports from educators and parents about COVID-19 cases at schools are predictably pouring in on social media from around the city. Far from calling for strike action against what is now a life-and-death question, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) is negotiating with the school district to reopen schools to serve as day cares while parents are herded back to unsafe factories and workplaces.

The biggest cluster of infections to have emerged so far is at McCutcheon Elementary, in the North Side's Uptown neighborhood. As of Wednesday, a second worker at McCutcheon, a teacher, has tested positive. According to a city statement, this teacher was a close contact of the first worker to test positive.

Despite the fairly clear timeline, district spokesperson Emily Bolton had the audacity to suggest the CPS workers might have become infected elsewhere. Bolton, a former communications director for the Virginia Democratic Party, wrote in a statement, "While the district cannot rule out the possibility of in-school transmission, it also cannot rule out the possibility that these cases were acquired in the community, outside of school."

The outbreak at McCutcheon has resulted in "chaos," according to a CTU statement, as the positive COVID-19 tests have put an additional eight people in quarantine. Those quarantined include the principal and assistant principal, and there is now just one teacher left working in-person at the school.

Needless to say, this is not the only case. According to a report in *Chalkbeat*, the district has reported 23 positive

COVID-19 diagnoses this week.

Additionally, a teacher who is on the executive board of the CTU has compiled a list of schools with positive COVID-19 cases and has received reports from 40 schools so far. She notes that this is likely a vast undercount, writing in a tweet, "This is just people who reported to ME when I asked on FB. Many were too scared to even put in the comments section and sent me private messages for fear of retaliation. Which means there are likely MORE cases out there unreported or not being counted publicly."

In response to this dire situation, the CTU, far from uniting their roughly 30,000 members in a struggle against the reopening plan, is working around the clock to come to an agreement with CPS to get all teachers back into classrooms. Rejecting the essential demands that learning should continue remotely and non-essential production be shut down until the pandemic is under control, the union has accepted that more teachers and students will be brought back. In fact, officials have even touted this as part of their strategy.

In a video posted Monday as the first wave of students returned—those in Pre-K and special education cluster programs—CTU president Jesse Sharkey, a former leading member of the pseudo-left International Socialist Organization (ISO), said, "In two weeks, we have over 10,000 more of our members coming back, all of our K-8 staff, which will then be the large majority of our union."

Sharkey added, "So, the stakes do get higher. They will have to bargain with us. Already, bargaining has improved somewhat. Just in the past several days... We want a health metric, and so do parents, principals, public health experts. Give us a metric, we say, but if they won't, we've suggested an alternative: delay restarting school, vaccinate staff, allow staff voluntary return, put testing and other mitigations and negotiate over the calendar. This situation shows them to be completely unreasonable, and us being creative in talking about ways to open, etc. Pressure is mounting on CPS."

In other words, the CTU accepts the basic framework of

reopening schools and further infections of educators, students and others in the community. They are simply trying to find the best formula for covering up their complete betrayal of teachers.

As can be seen from the experience in New York City, the union's demand for a "health" metric is a diversion to prevent educators from taking any independent initiative. Once the metric was agreed upon, the UFT facilitated school reopenings, and rolled over completely once New York City's Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio decided to simply ignore it.

In fact, the CTU, along with the national teachers unions and the Biden administration, promotes the fiction that schools can be safely reopened for in-person instruction, provided the union has a "seat at the table" in formulating the plans. In October, a CTU video merely called on CPS to "provide a clear plan for safety that includes investment in the proper ventilation, contact tracing and routine, comprehensive COVID-19 testing in our school" and appealed to the district to "invest in making our buildings safe."

The return of CPS educators to the classroom will also serve as a cudgel to force other teachers back into the classroom, such as those in Cicero District 99, just west of the city. Around 85 percent of teachers in Cicero rejected a request from the district superintendent to teach remotely from school buildings and failed to report.

The reason for the CTU's fecklessness is not simply its leaders. Their chief task, as with all the unions, is to prop up the Democratic Party and to suppress the class struggle.

There is nothing that the CTU would fundamentally disagree with in the recent statement from Biden's chief economic adviser, financier Brian Deese, who said, "We need to get the schools open, so that parents, and particularly women, who are being disproportionately hurt in this economy, can get back to work." Indeed, Sharkey and the CTU featured prominently in an ad for Biden filmed during the 2019 teachers strike.

In fact, CTU and its allies declined to report widely on the nearly identical statements made by Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot, who has pushed aggressively to reopen schools. Chicago alderman Carlos Ramirez-Rosa, who is a member of the pseudo-left Democratic Socialists of America, only recently reported, "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."

This sentiment was later confirmed from excerpts of a

letter Lightfoot sent to state senators opposing a bill expanding CTU's bargaining rights.

Significantly, the CTU and its leading figures have remained quiet about Trump's coup attempt and have refused to organize teachers to oppose the threat of fascism in the same way they have refused to defend educators' lives. This is no accident, because to raise the alarm against both dangers would cut across the interests of the Democratic Party and threaten to unleash the vast social anger that has built up in the working class throughout the pandemic.

In order to stop the reopening of schools for in-person learning, teachers must organize independently of the CTU, which has shown itself to be a pliant tool of Lightfoot and the Chicago elites. The turn must now be to the working class, uniting with Ford autoworkers at the Chicago Assembly Plant, Amazon workers at the sprawling hubs throughout the metro region, health care workers enduring ever-greater catastrophe on the front-lines of the pandemic, and all other sections of the working class.

All non-essential workplaces must be shut down and workers paid to stay home until vaccines can be widely distributed. The vast wealth of the financial oligarchy must be redirected to meet the needs of society, including fully funding remote learning and providing every student and educator with state-of-the-art technology.

It is on this basis that we call on educators to join the Illinois Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which is in the process of formation. We are part of a network of rank-and-file committees that have formed among educators, autoworkers, Amazon workers and other sections of the working class across the US and internationally. Our aim is to prepare for a nationwide political general strike to put an end to the homicidal policies of the ruling class and oppose the growing threat of fascism. All those who wish to join this struggle should sign up today at wsws.org/edsafety.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact