

Teachers and parents speak out on deadly reopening of Chicago Public Schools

Our reporters
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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. 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.

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) teachers for the district's youngest and special education students were forced back to work last week under threat of discipline, including docked pay and getting locked out of their time-card and CPS Google accounts. Students began returning to these classrooms on Monday, and the return to in-person learning has already produced outbreaks of COVID-19 at multiple school sites.

In the coming week, thousands more teachers are slated to return, followed by tens of thousands of K-8 students on February 1, representing a massive public health risk to Chicago educators, students and the wider community.

On Friday morning, teachers and parents in the Southwest Side Chicago neighborhood of Pilsen marched to demand the schools close. Teachers have been compiling a list of COVID-19 outbreaks, which now includes at least 40 schools where someone has become sick. Only one school, McCutcheon, has been officially identified as having an outbreak.

On Friday, CPS CEO Janice Jackson explained that the reopening in Chicago is part of the Democratic Party's nationwide policy of forcing teachers and students to return to in-person learning while the pandemic rages. Jackson said, "I think everybody agrees, kids should be back in school." She added that president-elect Joe Biden "has said that's one of his top priorities, to see students back in school. The federal government has stepped up to give us resources in order to do that safely. The time is now."

Expressing the callous indifference of the financial elite, Jackson stated, "COVID is going to be part of our lives for a long time."

The aggressive imposition of the demands of the financial aristocracy to reopen the city, backed by the national, state and local Democratic Party—from which the CTU has absolutely no independence—has made it impossible to win even the appearance of "negotiations." Chicago Teachers Union President Jesse Sharkey pleaded on Friday, "It's forcing us into a corner. Give us an agreement."

The CTU issued an update on negotiations with the CPS indicating that the union has two demands for the district: reinstatement of locked-out teachers and an agreed-upon reopening plan that spells out the level of citywide coronavirus transmission needed before heading back to in-person teaching and set criteria for when schools will reverse course due to outbreaks. The CTU is also reportedly continuing to press for a voluntary return for teachers after a first-dose of the COVID-19 vaccine.

The union has allowed the schools to reopen and thereby escalated what is already a public health catastrophe in Chicago. They stand utterly exposed in having done nothing to organize a stop to the reopening, to defend the teachers who are being disciplined, or to shut down the more than 40 schools with COVID-19 outbreaks.

A veteran teacher who wishes to remain anonymous told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "Teachers are reporting that there has been COVID already and they just opened! And the schools have not closed. My school has not opened yet. I have asked for a medical accommodation to stay remote and am still waiting to hear. If my request is not granted it is positively criminal!"

"Maybe Lori Lightfoot or Janice Jackson needs one of their children to get COVID-19 or maybe they need to, maybe they would care about the rest of us then?"

He also commented on the health risk facing children, stating, “They also say that children don’t usually get it. What do we really know about kids and COVID-19? Most of the studies have been about adults and older teens because they are out of the house more and in the workforce. Kids have been at home protected so the evidence on kids is tainted.

“But what we do know for sure is that kids act as a carrier of it and may not show symptoms, which means they pass it to adults like teachers in the classroom who bring it home to their family and loved ones. CPS has no liability with this because if staff gets sick they will say you can’t prove you got it from the building.

“COVID-19 has long lasting effects on our bodies. Many do not fully recover and others have suffered permanent damage. What about many students who have asthma? They can’t wear a mask all day for seven hours! These air purifiers are not even appropriate for most CPS room sizes. It’s a joke!”

In response to claims by CPS officials that schools are not transmission vectors for the virus, he added, “The teachers don’t believe it. We know the score. It’s the public CPS wants to fool! It’s all paper lies. At least 400 janitors were supposed to be hired and only 100 were. And what is 400 supposed to do for over 600 buildings anyway? There is no hot water to wash hands. Bathrooms are not adequate even when we did not have COVID. You can’t pass paper to kids and have small reading groups, or help kids put their coats and scarves on. You have to be six feet away. Students are better off at home right now.”

Another teacher, Mollie, said, “I don’t agree with the reopening. Vaccines aren’t available for us yet. People are still getting sick and dying. I know remote isn’t perfect but it is safer! Even in-person doesn’t guarantee students will do much better since they will still be online. Many of my coworkers and I are very concerned. We either risk our job or our health. That’s the choice we are left with.”

Brian Deese, the incoming director of Biden’s National Economic Council, stated bluntly on Wednesday the class interests behind the ongoing drive to reopen schools. “We need to get the schools open,” Deese claimed, “so that parents, and particularly women, who are being disproportionately hurt in this economy, can get back to work.”

In response to this, a veteran south side CPS teacher said, “It seems pretty clear that they want people working. Lightfoot wants bars and restaurants open. And appealing to women is a nice touch.

“Rolling out the vaccine at a glacial pace is not helping, but they think it’s good enough. They are okay with the fallout and lots of dead people. It’s an acceptable tradeoff for them. They won’t be around in 20 to 30 years when the aftereffects of surviving are known. They’re sociopaths. And Biden’s gonna give everyone another \$1,400 so people will be pacified.”

Celia, a CPS elementary school teacher, said, “Of course it’s because of money. The Democrats are just as ruthless as the Republicans when it comes to protecting the almighty dollar. But Democrats go on the media daily to share sympathy with our struggles and do nothing to answer us. I agree this is another example of profit above people and it’s getting tiring.”

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 frontlines 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.



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