

Chicago Teachers Union postures with “strike” vote as schools continue in-person learning

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To close schools and fully fund remote learning, Chicago educators must organize independently of the CTU through the formation of a Chicago 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 sign up today at wsws.org/edsafety!

As Chicago Public Schools (CPS) begins the second week of in-person learning, there has been a surge of COVID-19 outbreaks impacting at least 49 schools across the city. In this dire situation, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) has called an emergency meeting of its House of Delegates on Wednesday to consider a vote to strike or take some other kind of “unified job action.”

Educators must beware. The CTU, like other unions, supports the incoming Biden administration’s pledge to “do everything … to safely reopen the majority of our K-through-eight schools by the end of the first 100 days.” The union’s primary concern is to maintain a “seat at the table” for union officials, and they have done nothing to keep schools closed or protect teachers and workers until vaccinations are widely available for everyone.

The bogus character of the action being contemplated by the CTU is indicated by the fact that the union is apparently not considering a traditional strike, but rather a collective decision to teach remotely instead of reporting in person to school buildings as demanded by Chicago’s Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot and CPS CEO Janice Jackson. According to reports, the earliest teachers could take action in this scenario is February 1, the same day around 71,000 K-8 students are scheduled to return to classrooms.

While CTU leadership has intimated that an actual strike could occur if CPS decides to lock out teachers who

have taken this action, this is the last thing the union wants. Chicago teachers have already been locked out and the union has not called for any mass action to come to their defense. Officials such as CTU President Jesse Sharkey have repeatedly declared their intention to “keep working hard at the table,” so “hopefully we can get a compromise and come up with a safe way to do this.” When asked by a parent on a union Zoom call whether teachers would strike, executive board member Chris Baehrend answered, “We certainly hope not!”

That the CTU is even considering a vote in the House of Delegates and the wider membership on taking collective action is a response to widespread anger over the provocative reopening plan being implemented by the Lightfoot administration and mass sentiment for a fight among Chicago educators and the wider working class, including parents.

One parent who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the reopening plan stated, “I hate it. I’ve got two kids in CPS. They will not be returning. At a minimum, teachers should all be vaccinated before educator-led talks begin about reopening. I’m a city worker, and I’ve been hung out to dry by the mayor as well. The Lightfoot administration seems extra-determined to just accelerate the body count in the last quarter of the game.”

Educators and other workers are especially horrified over the decision by Lightfoot and Illinois’ billionaire Governor J.B. Pritzker to loosen COVID-19 restrictions across the state, including Chicago. As of this week, sports, casinos, group fitness and cultural institutions such as museums are being allowed to reopen in Chicago, despite a citywide test positivity rate of 7.7 percent and a continued case rate of 33.3 per 100,000 people.

The Chicago region was initially not going to be included in the loosened restrictions due to its high

hospitalization rate, but this policy was reversed after a decision by the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) to consider increased contract staffing in calculations concerning hospital capacity. In response, Lightfoot thanked Pritzker and Dr. Ngozi Ezike, IDPH's director, for "understanding that adjustments needed to be made in the way hospital capacity is calculated."

Lightfoot and city officials have pushed heavily to shred any remaining restrictions and move toward reopening restaurants and other businesses. Dr. Allison Arwady, the commissioner of the Chicago Department of Public Health and one of the city officials leading the charge in manufacturing pseudo-scientific justifications for reopening schools, said during a recent online meeting, "We're still a few days, could be a week, away from this. But if progress continues in the right way, I think it is likely that we may be able to move all the way to the Tier 1 mitigation, which is when we are able to reopen indoor dining."

City and state officials have touted the imminent start of vaccination for essential workers, including teachers, beginning in February. The reality is that vaccine supply is extremely limited and rollout plans have been vague to nonexistent. Up to this point, the city has only been receiving 32,000 doses per week. At this rate, with Chicago's current population, and with a need for two doses per person, Chicago could expect to see its entire population vaccinated in somewhere around three years.

Most importantly from the standpoint of school and workplace reopenings, official estimates are that the general population will only begin receiving vaccines in May. Additionally, young children are not expected to be vaccinated until summer at the earliest, meaning they will still be able to spread infection to their parents, as well as other students and their families. In other words, even if CPS and CTU work out an accelerated timetable to vaccinate teachers, reopened schools will fuel a surge of COVID-19 infections and deaths among the city's working-class population.

Arwady and CPDH are claiming vaccines will start becoming available to all Chicagoans by the end of May, when the truth is these plans are extremely tentative, on Arwady's own admission. All present indications are that it will be well into the fall, if that, before vaccination is widespread.

At an elementary school on Tuesday morning, Jackson admitted, "I cannot promise a COVID-free environment." Nevertheless, she insisted that the district would not back down from plans to bring teachers and students into

classrooms, saying, "Our teachers are the bedrock of our schools. We cannot do the work that we need to do without the instructors. But at this juncture, we have to come together and not debate whether or not we have in-person schooling but debate how to do it safely."

The CTU is deeply enmeshed in the power structure of the Democratic Party. Its leaders have already agreed in principle with the framework laid out by Jackson of keeping schools open, with teacher "volunteers" if necessary. Any limited action taken by the union will be undertaken with the aim of concluding a rotten agreement with the district that they will try to package as "safe."

There is enormous determination among educators and other workers to fight and take real collective action. But educators will have to take matters into their own hands and break with the unions, which are tied by a thousand threads to the Democratic Party and the financial aristocracy.

The Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which is in the process of formation, will fight to unite educators and all workers in Chicago and throughout the state around the necessary demands that all schools and nonessential 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.

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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