

Chicago educators form independent rank-and-file committee to fight school reopenings

Close schools and nonessential production until the pandemic is contained! Full income protection to all!

Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
21 January 2021

This is the founding statement of the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. We call on all Chicago educators, parents and students to join our committee at wsws.org/edsafety. Attend and help build for our next meeting this Saturday, January 23, at 12 p.m. Central Time.

For months, the Democratic Party, which controls all the levers of political power in Chicago and Illinois, has been on a collision course with teachers, parents and the broader working class across the city and the state. Despite the uncontrolled spread of the novel coronavirus and countless national and international studies pointing to the dangers of opening schools, Governor J.B. Pritzker and Mayor Lori Lightfoot are resuming in-person instruction.

This week saw the cumulative COVID-19 death toll in the US reach 400,000. Schools in Europe are closing as additional evidence emerges of the obvious: the reopening of schools is rapidly spreading infections as new, more contagious forms of the illness emerge.

What's taking place in Chicago is a frontal assault on the working class, and part of the bipartisan effort to stampede children back into schools and parents back into workplaces in New York, Boston, Washington D.C., Los Angeles and other cities, so that businesses can return to producing profits. "We need to get the schools open, so that parents, and particularly women," Biden's top economic advisor Brian Deese said last week, "can get back to work."

With a citywide testing positivity rate close to 10 percent, and closer to 20 percent in many working class neighborhoods, Chicago Public Schools officials have ordered all pre-K through eighth grade teachers without district-approved medical exceptions back into buildings this month, regardless of their family's health conditions. The district is pressing for more than 70,000 K-8 students to return February 1.

Educators who have refused to return to school buildings have had their pay docked and been locked out of their CPS Google accounts so they cannot teach their students remotely. In order to silence dissent, CPS is disciplining teachers who speak to parents about disease risk and the poor quality of CPS' "hybrid" learning with third and fourth step disciplinary procedures, reserved for the most serious forms of misconduct, which could lead to suspension or termination.

In the face of this campaign of intimidation, the Chicago Teachers Union has done nothing to defend educators, or students and communities.

That the CTU finally held a vote in the House of Delegates on a possible strike is a response to the widespread anger over the provocative reopening plan. There is mass sentiment for a fight among Chicago educators and in the wider working class, including parents, but the CTU has no intention of leading any real fight. We don't need endless rhetoric, we need collective action to protect lives.

Educators are taking action to save lives!

That is why we have formed the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and why we urge all Illinois educators to do the same. The purpose of our committee is to unite Chicago educators with manufacturing, transportation, health care and other workers to prepare collective action to stop the murderous policy of reopening schools in the midst of a pandemic.

This includes the preparation of a general strike to shut schools and non-essential industries and demand full compensation for all workers and the resources needed to vaccinate the population, address the critical social needs of students and parents and provide high-quality remote learning until the pandemic is under control.

The Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee rejects the lie that there is no money for these life-saving necessities. From the beginning of the pandemic, the concern of the political establishment, from Trump and the US Congress, to state and local officials from both parties, has been to shore up the stock market and the private fortunes of the corporate and financial oligarchy that runs America.

The Democrats and Republicans found trillions to bail out Wall Street, the big hospital chains, airlines and other giant corporations while providing a pittance to workers and their families facing the worst social and economic catastrophe since the Great Depression. Since March, America's billionaires have seen their net worth rise by more than \$1 trillion, due to the rise in the stock markets fueled by the bailout cash given to corporations. Illinois billionaires who saw their wealth increase include Ken Griffin; Thomas, Penny and J.B. Pritzker; Sam Zell; Mark Walter; Joseph Grendys; Steven Sarowitz; and Joe Mansueto. Over the same period, more than 400,000 have died, understaffed hospitals were overwhelmed and 50 million Americans, including 17 million children, went hungry.

Society can no longer afford the rich! The private fortunes of these pandemic profiteers should be used for social benefit of the population as a whole.

In addition to schools and nursing homes, factories and other industrial locations are the biggest spreaders of the deadly virus, according to state contact tracing data that only came to light through an accidental leak to a journalist. Hundreds, if not thousands, of workers have been infected at Amazon, UPS, Chicago Transit Authority, Ford, Fiat Chrysler, JBS, Tyson and other companies.

Workers at Ford's Chicago Assembly Plant have already established their own rank-and-file safety committee, independent of the United Auto

Workers union, which has kept workers in infected factories despite the COVID-19 deaths of dozens of workers. The committee is part of a growing national and international network of committees among autoworkers, Amazon, health care, transit workers and educators in New York City, Michigan, Texas, California, Alabama and other areas.

Our committees are democratically controlled by workers ourselves, not corrupt union officials who falsely claim to “represent” us while imposing the dictates of management.

CTU: fact vs. myth

It has been ten years since the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) took over the CTU. It is time to evaluate its record. For all the empty rhetoric about “social justice,” promotion of identity politics and backing from the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), the CTU has accepted the reopening of the schools and the victimization of militant teachers. This is after years of accepting school closures, mass layoffs and the expansion of charter schools.

At the same time, CTU President Jesse Sharkey and Vice President Stacy Davis Gates promote Biden as a savior when Chicago teachers have had ample, bitter experience with Obama’s and Biden’s education team in Arne Duncan and Rahm Emanuel.

Our committee is completely independent of both corporate-controlled parties. The January 6 storming of the US Capitol, a fascist attempt to overthrow the outcome of the 2020 presidential election, is the outcome of months of agitation by Trump to mobilize right-wing forces against school and business closures and other basic public health measures that conflict with the profit interests of big business.

Far from calling on workers to mobilize against this fascist danger, Biden is calling for bipartisan “unity” with Trump’s Republican co-conspirators. Biden and the Democrats defend corporate America and fear nothing more than a well-informed and determined movement of workers and young people fighting to defend our democratic and social rights.

But this is exactly what is needed. Educators, students, parents, and all workers across Chicago, Illinois and northwest Indiana should join us now and take up the following demands:

- **Immediately close all schools and all truly non-essential workplaces with no loss of income for workers!** The science is clear: closing schools and non-essential workplaces saves lives. They must remain closed until the threat to public health is over and rank-and-file safety committees, working in conjunction with trusted scientists and public health experts, can ensure the safety of children, teachers and all workers.

- **Free Rebekah Jones and defend all those who speak out against or refuse to work in unsafe conditions!** There is massive opposition everywhere, but many fear speaking up. Teachers know they will be targeted for discipline and abuse and they know the unions will do nothing to defend them. Florida whistleblower Rebekah Jones, the founder of The COVID Monitor, has been framed up and jailed for exposing outbreaks. Now she is sick with COVID-19. All educators, students, or workers who reveal, speak out against or refuse to work under unsafe conditions—whether in schools, factories, warehouses, hospitals or offices—must be defended against any victimization by employers or state officials. Hands off Rebekah Jones and all workers. Those who have been victimized must be rehired with back pay.

- **Fully fund high-quality online public education, including free high-speed Internet access for all!** The state of virtual learning is a disgrace. High quality public education for all is a social right! Computer hardware, software, broadband internet access, and adequate training and

support must be provided to all teachers, students and parents for free. Class sizes must be reduced. Thousands of educators, staff and tech workers across the region must be hired to make this a reality.

- **Full income protection for parents who choose to stay home!** Educators are not oblivious to the needs of parents, the corporate-controlled politicians are! Full income must be provided to those who cannot work because they choose to stay home with children. Unemployment benefits and additional forms of assistance must be increased to protect families, and a permanent moratorium put in place to stop all evictions and home foreclosures.

- **Publish all existing information about the spread of COVID-19 in schools and workplaces in the most comprehensive and accessible form possible!** We now know that behind the scenes, Illinois and other states are carefully tracking COVID-19 outbreaks. But the information, when it is published at all, is only partially reported, part of a conscious attempt to conceal and downplay the danger. COVID-19 outbreaks are *never* limited to one school, one household or one workplace. The opposite is true: *all* outbreaks are connected in *one continuous process* of transmission. To protect ourselves and our families, we require a complete and precise picture of the spread of COVID-19 in and across all locations, easily accessible to everyone.

- **Hire and train nurses and expand hospital capacity to meet demand!** Patients must not be allowed to die in hallways awaiting treatment, and nurses and doctors must not be subjected to the psychological trauma. The resources hoarded by the rich must be used to hire and train medical professionals, build emergency facilities to meet medical needs and fully vaccinate the population.

Get involved!

The catastrophe can be stopped! Through rational and scientific action on the part of the working class, infection rates can be slowed. Every measure must be taken to immediately contain the virus and save as many lives as possible until the vaccine becomes widely available.

We call on all educators and support staff, bus drivers, paraprofessionals, nurses, secretaries, classroom aides, janitors, cooks, school psychologists, social workers, and workers from all industries, to join our network and build rank-and-file safety committees in your school or workplace.

Fill out the “Join” form at wsws.org/edsafety. Whether you are a teacher or other school worker, an autoworker, health care worker, or you work in another industry, we will put you in touch with a committee in your industry or help you establish a new one.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact