

# Chicago Public Schools brands collective action to stop in-person learning “illegal”

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*To close schools and fully fund remote learning, Chicago educators have formed the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. This committee is independent of the CTU and Democratic Party and aims to unite educators, parents, students and the broader working class to prepare strike action to close all schools and nonessential workplaces. We call on all Chicago educators, parents and students to join our committee at [wsws.org/edsafety](https://wsws.org/edsafety). Attend and help build for our next meeting this Saturday, January 23, at 12 p.m. Central Time.*

On Thursday morning, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) Chief Talent Officer Matt Lyons issued a highly provocative letter threatening Chicago educators that any “collective failure” to return for in-person instruction “constitutes an illegal strike.”

The letter was issued the morning after the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) House of Delegates approved a resolution which stated, “Do you authorize the CTU to conduct remote work only, starting on January 25, 2021, or on whatever date the Board requires K-8 members to appear in person? In addition, in the event that CPS retaliates against or locks out members as a result, do you authorize a strike?”

The resolution passed the House of Delegates by 84 percent, and CTU’s full membership has until Saturday evening to make the final decision. The letter by Lyons is meant to browbeat teachers into submission and falsify the dangers posed to the health and lives of educators, parents, students and the broader community.

Lyons writes, “We are only moving forward with our reopening plan because public health experts have made it clear that bringing students back is both safe and necessary, and we are fully committed to providing you the safe working environment you deserve.”

In reality, the policy of opening schools amid the raging pandemic is incredibly reckless, and there has already been a surge of COVID-19 outbreaks impacting at least 54 schools across the city.

There is enormous anger building among rank-and-file Chicago teachers, school workers, parents and students that threatens to erupt outside the control of the CTU and in direct opposition to the Democratic Party that runs the city and state. It is for this reason the CTU felt compelled to call for strike authorization to try to corral this opposition until they can reach a miserable deal with the district that they feel they can sell to their members.

CTU leaders have repeatedly expressed their desire not to strike and have passively accepted the reopening of schools over the past three weeks. Special education and Pre-K teachers were brought back at the start of the year and Kindergarten through 8th grade are set to return January 25.

Teachers are already being retaliated against, and the union has done nothing to mobilize its 25,000 members to oppose this. As of this writing, 87 teachers reportedly remain locked out of their online classroom and docked pay for refusing to teach in person, which CPS initially imposed last week.

Teachers have faced disciplinary threats for reporting on the conditions inside schools or the inadequacy of the hybrid learning model CPS officials have mandated, while the CTU has not called for any collective action in their defense. In place of the motto, “an injury to one is an injury to all,” the union now proclaims, “let’s wait until more are injured before acting.”

No faith should be placed in the CTU resolution’s promise to strike if more teachers are victimized. The district announced in early December its plan to reopen

schools, which they have pursued aggressively. In his letter, Lyons notes that the district and union have conducted over 60 negotiation sessions over reopening, writing, “The union’s input has in many cases strengthened our reopening plan, and we remain committed to continuing negotiations in good faith with union leadership. We are meeting every day and will continue to do so. An agreement is within reach, so long as we continue working hard together.”

Even if the union is forced to strike, they will quickly reach a settlement with the district that does not guarantee remote-only learning. The CTU has made multiple proposals, none of which include fully remote instruction until the virus is contained. All of them have included some form of in-person instruction.

According to a report from WBEZ, the CTU is now proposing a flexible staffing plan that would primarily allow teachers to work remotely if they have health concerns for themselves or a family member.

As of this writing, 20,423 people have died from COVID-19 in Illinois. Based on the current vaccination rate, it will be almost three years before the city of Chicago is fully vaccinated. The return to classrooms is a life-and-death question for educators.

In this context, the CTU resolution is utterly spineless. It is designed to dissipate anger over the union’s failure to protect educators’ basic right to life. This resolution buys time for the CTU at the expense of the health and safety of the 5,800 educators who have already been ordered to return to classrooms. It fails to make any principled demands on CPS or defend the 87 teachers who are still locked out.

The ruthless pursuit of school reopenings carried out by the Democratic Party establishment in Chicago—above all, Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot and CPS CEO Janice Jackson—is in line with the aims of US President Joe Biden, who has pledged to “do everything ... to safely reopen the majority of our K-through-eight schools by the end of the first 100 days.”

Fundamentally, both the CTU and CPS agree with this central policy of the Biden administration. The union’s major complaint is that CPS will not bargain with them on the conditions of the return.

As Democratic mayors in Chicago, New York and Los Angeles push to reopen their districts, teachers are finding their methods to be no less ruthless than their Republican colleagues. The CTU’s failure to protect,

let alone improve, the living conditions of its membership is not a flaw in the character of the leadership, but a reflection of the larger crisis of American capitalism, decades of deindustrialization and attacks on democratic rights.

The Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is fighting to unite educators and other workers to save lives and end the pandemic. This includes the demand to stop in-person learning and nonessential businesses until the pandemic is fully contained. Workers must be paid to stay home until vaccines are widely distributed. Remote learning can be implemented at a high level by 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](https://wsws.org/edsafety) and attend our next meeting this Saturday!



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**