

Overwhelming opposition among Chicago educators to deadly school reopenings

Alexander Fangmann
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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.

In the face of threats that taking collective action to prevent deadly school reopenings would constitute an “illegal strike,” Chicago educators voted overwhelmingly to approve a union resolution to continue teaching remotely. In response, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) CEO Janice Jackson was forced to announce Sunday that the return of K-8 educators would be delayed to Wednesday at the earliest.

Despite this temporary delay in the full reopening of schools, Chicago educators must not have any illusions that the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) is fighting in their interests. Behind the scenes, Chicago’s Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot and CPS officials are working furiously to hammer out a deal with the CTU on the resumption of in-person learning, as they have done in over 60 negotiating sessions throughout the fall that led to the situation today.

Support for the resolution among Chicago’s 25,000 educators was overwhelming, with a 71 percent margin in favor. Those voting represented 86 percent of the total membership. The high degree of support for the resolution and the district’s move to delay shows the real relationship of forces in the city, and both CPS and CTU are interested in avoiding a confrontation that could quickly get out of the union’s control and raise demands far beyond those it has been negotiating.

Both CPS and the CTU have undoubtedly followed the recent establishment of the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which is spearheading the fight to unite educators with the broader working class to close all schools and nonessential workplaces. Our committee is completely independent of the unions and the capitalist parties, and is demanding that the financial elite pay for educators, nonessential workers and their families to stay home safely until the pandemic is contained.

A network of such independent committees have now been established in New York, Michigan, California, Texas, Alabama, Pennsylvania and Tennessee, with plans to form further committees in Utah, Colorado, Washington and other states in the

coming days. In Montgomery, Alabama, teachers are considering wildcat strike action to close schools in the district, after four educators died from COVID-19 in the past week alone and the pandemic is ripping through the state.

Educators and other workers throughout Chicago are overwhelmingly opposed to the reopening of schools and other businesses by the Lightfoot administration and Illinois’ billionaire Democratic Governor J.B. Pritzker. Just 3,200 students, or about half of the roughly 6,000 Pre-K and special education cluster program students whose parents opted them in for in-person learning, have actually showed up to school buildings, according to CPS attendance figures. This represents only 19 percent of all such students.

Reaction to the reopening of restaurants among Chicago workers has largely been one of dismay, as it increases the likelihood that infections will spiral further out of control. Already, Chicago has an elevated test positivity rate of 7.2 percent, while daily testing in the city has fallen dramatically since November. To date, 20,680 Illinois residents have died from COVID-19, the sixth-highest figure for any state.

The Lightfoot administration and CPS officials have continued to insist that the reopening of schools and other workplaces is safe, to the point of commissioning the Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH) to submit a flawed, low-quality article to a journal in order to claim science is on their side. In fact, the most recent scientific studies indicate schools are vectors of infection and pose a grave danger not only to children, but also to their family members as well as educators and their families.

This is to say nothing of the emergence of new variants of COVID-19, including the B.1.1.7 strain, which has prompted the closure of schools in Europe due to its faster rate of spread, and recent reports of its higher lethality. In fact, the continued delay of taking widespread and coordinated measures to halt the pandemic threatens a catastrophe, as the deepening spread of COVID-19 throughout the population increased the likelihood that mutations will develop which allow the virus to evade current vaccines.

Lightfoot is being driven by the agenda of the financial oligarchy, ably represented by the new Biden administration which has pledged to reopen the majority of schools by the end of April. For the ruling class that the Democrats represent, workers must return to work in order to produce profits and prop up share values in the stock market. In order for this to happen, educators must be dragooned into classrooms to serve as childcare, no matter how

many become infected or die.

Indeed, the Federal Reserve's "Beige Book" report for January noted that for the district under the purview of the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, "Contacts continued to report elevated employee absenteeism due to Covid-19 cases or exposures and childcare challenges for their workers, with some manufacturers saying they were forced to slow production following the Thanksgiving holiday due to staffing challenges."

One veteran CPS teacher who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* made clear the irrational and business-driven nature of the reopening, saying, "CPS has been leaving Chicago families, teachers and staff in a state of uncertainty and constant anxiety surrounding their decision of returning to in-person instruction while in the middle of some of the highest positivity rates some neighborhoods have seen so far during this entire pandemic. They have no interest in instruction staying consistent and predictable for all involved while keeping everyone at home and safe."

"It is irresponsible for anyone to go back until teachers and students are vaccinated and community spread has been adequately dealt with. CPS continues to lie and shows depraved indifference to so many workers that have requested tele-work accommodations for very valid reasons."

"Lightfoot and Jackson want people to return so they can babysit the kids of parents they want back at work. They do not have an instruction problem, they have a child care issue. Teachers are not babysitters, contrary to some public opinion. Continuing to try to force teachers back and play Russian roulette with their and their families lives shows how morally bankrupt they are. The vote showed that we will not allow her to bully and threaten us back. We refuse to return, but we do not refuse to teach."

Even with the delay to bring back K-8 educators, Pre-K and special education cluster program teachers are still being hung out to dry by CTU leadership and forced to make the decision whether to report to school buildings or face being docked pay and locked out of their virtual classrooms. According to recent reports, 55 of these teachers are still being locked out.

This division of CTU's membership was facilitated by the formulation of the union's resolution, which called for all educators to work remotely "starting on January 25, 2021, or on whatever date the Board requires K-8 members to appear in person." Jackson's letter to teachers made clear she expected Pre-K and cluster program teachers to continue to report in-person.

At an online union town hall meeting on Sunday, one Pre-K teacher questioned the CTU's invocation of solidarity, saying she could not afford to risk being unable to pay bills. CTU vice president Stacy Davis Gates responded condescendingly, "I trust as a grown up you make decisions that reflect your needs. There's always a choice. There are members. It's a false choice, and it is your choice to make. You do not have to enter those doors. Use the letter provided."

While union leaders have claimed any agreement with the district would involve reinstatement and making "whole" teachers victimized in this way, it is clear most Pre-K and special education teachers feel they do not have a choice and that they have been completely abandoned by the union.

In fact, the unions have long exploited divisions among their

own workers to assist in ramming through sellout agreements. During the 2019 wave of teachers strikes, the unions worked might and main to ensure one strike was over before another began, in order to prevent a national movement from emerging outside of their control.

Even now, CPS staff organized by SEIU, who went on strike with CTU members in 2019, are working in school buildings. In response to a question about these workers, Sharkey expressed complete indifference, saying, "They have the right to refuse work just like we do. Glad we're concerned about SECAS (special education classroom assistants) and that's something we'll hold in our hearts."

Asked why it has taken months for CTU to vote to authorize a strike, the veteran teacher noted, "CTU has totally allowed clerks, techs, Pre-K and clusters to hang in the wind and did NOTHING for them except a lot of talk," adding, "they're okay with sacrificial lambs and fallout. It's worth it to them."

While the enormous opposition to school reopenings has forced CTU to take a strike authorization vote, educators must be clear that CTU has already signaled it is prepared to come to an agreement involving "voluntary" staffing at reopened schools, as well as a plan that would see teachers back in classrooms before they or the general population have received effective doses of vaccine. As Sharkey pathetically said on the call, "we will try to win as much as we can."

In the coming days and weeks, rank-and-file Chicago educators must organize themselves independently of the CTU in order to return to fully remote learning for all CPS workers until the pandemic is contained. To oppose the homicidal policies demanded by the Democrats on behalf of Wall Street, a real leadership of educators must come forward and extend the struggle until all necessary measures are taken.

The Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is fighting to unite educators and all workers in Chicago and throughout the state around the central demand that all schools and nonessential workplaces must be shut down and workers paid to stay home until the population is vaccinated and the pandemic is contained. 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. We urge all Chicago educators who support these demands to join and help build our committee today!



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