

A revealing episode

Chicago teacher opposing return to school maligned for citing anti-Nazi poem

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Resistance by Chicago teachers, parents and students to the reckless reopening of the nation's third largest school district that has been building for months has reached a new peak in the weeks since Democratic city officials began a "phased" return to in-school instruction on January 4.

Mayor Lori Lightfoot and Chicago Public Schools CEO Janice Jackson have repeatedly threatened teachers for defying the back-to-school order and educators who have failed to return to school buildings have lost pay and been locked out of their school accounts, preventing them from teaching remotely from home.

After weeks of giving district officials a free hand to carry out vindictive attacks against one section of teachers after another, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) finally held a vote Sunday to take "collective action." Seventy-one percent of teachers voted on a resolution to work remotely until an agreement is reached with the city, and to strike if the district retaliates.

On January 15, Whitney Young High School teacher Stu Abram created a graphic promoting a car caravan protest organized by the CTU. His graphic pointed out that teachers were being herded back into deadly workplaces in phases and that collective action was needed to protect health and safety and defend from victimization those already ordered back, or all educators would suffer the consequences.

The graphic read in part, "Remember: First they came for our Clerks, then they came for Pre-K & Cluster, now they're coming for Elementary and soon, High School Teacher friends, they will be coming for you. We stop that together right now."

Abram's text was an allusion to the famous confessional speech by German theologian Martin Niemöller, who described how he found himself a prisoner in the Nazi camps after initially supporting the fascist party.

First, they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist.

Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak

out—because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

Two days later, the Anti-Defamation League Midwest tweeted to demand an apology on its Twitter account claiming its officials were "shocked" to see the CTU and the education non-profit organization Illinois Raise Your Hand "posting a flyer that appears to mirror Martin Niemöller's 'First They Came' confessional poem. The flyer's offensive rewrite of the poem, which speaks to the horrors of the Holocaust, is dangerous. An apology is needed."

Rather than defend the teacher's use of the famous poem, which has been long been cited in labor, civil rights, anti-war and other social struggles as a clarion call for unity of the oppressed and against any complicity with oppressors, CTU political officer Martin Ritter issued a cowardly statement, saying the graphic was not official protest media and had not been posted on the CTU's social media accounts.

CTU President Jesse Sharkey went even further. "For the record, I don't think that CPS' bringing faculty and staff back in waves, thereby making solidarity difficult, is the moral equivalent of the Holocaust. It isn't. Point taken," he wrote.

Having been thrown under the bus by CTU leaders, Abram issued an apology even though many rank-and-file teachers felt he had done nothing wrong and protested the attack on him.

"I am the designer of the graphic," Abram wrote, "which had the quote at the bottom making reference to the divisive tactics used to create the conditions for mass suffering and death in the Holocaust, but we certainly are nowhere near that level of horror yet, and I am saddened that I offended some as that was not my intent.

"...[I]n no way was I trying to imply that returning to work

during a pandemic was the same as being marched into gas chambers, but someone who himself has a Jewish mother and has heard so many stories of death during our pandemic, I am deeply, deeply hurt by the actions of this mayor and CPS leadership which will certainly cause many more deaths...”

The ADL is always on the prowl for supposed trivializations of the Holocaust, but it remained quiet on the activities of prominent Jews, such as Stephen Miller and Jared Kushner, in the fascistic Trump administration, which whipped up right-wing supporters with xenophobia, racism and anti-Semitism. Neither has the ADL criticized the Netanyahu government in Israel, which is allied with ultra-nationalist settler parties, known as the Jewish equivalents of the Ku Klux Klan, for their violent anti-Arab racism.

Even more significant was Sharkey’s decision to endorse the ADL’s libel against a teacher whose message was equivalent to the basic labor principle, “An injury to one is an injury to all.” It is precisely this widely held principle among teachers that Sharkey, once a leader of the now-defunct International Socialist Organization (ISO) and the CTU, have made war against as they maneuver with the Lightfoot administration to reopen the schools.

For months, the CTU blocked collective action by the city’s 25,000 teachers and support staff to demand remote learning until infection rates are controlled and a vaccine is widely administered. Instead, the union has been working furiously to conclude a deal that will reopen schools, leaving teachers and staff to fend for themselves.

Throughout the winter, the union has promoted the deadly fantasy of a “safe reopening,” as infection rates remain high, vaccination is not widely available and public health officials, including Biden adviser Dr. Michael Osterholm, are warning of a third wave of deaths.

The current COVID-19 death toll in the United States of 435,000 is now more than the military deaths suffered by US forces in World War II. Biden stated fatalities will reach “well over 600,000,” declaring “there’s nothing we can do to change the trajectory of the pandemic in the next several months.” Instead of mitigating the disease, Biden and Democratic city leaders across the country, with the assistance of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA), are redoubling their efforts to reopen schools.

While feigning concern for the educational and emotional needs of young people, they are motivated by one factor: As Biden said Monday, opening the schools has the advantage of “putting millions of people back to work. All those mothers and fathers that are home, taking care of their children rather than go to work, even when they can work.” He added, “So, this is about generating economic

growth”—corporate profits.

Chicago teacher Stu Abram’s allusion to the mass deaths resulting from some of the most horrific crimes of the 20th century and his warnings that teachers must not allow themselves to be divided in the face of the current danger are entirely legitimate. In fact, they have greater relevance since the danger of fascism has become a burning reality once again.

There is a direct connection between ruling class’ pandemic policy and the rise in fascism and far-right violence. Trump and other political representatives of big business, including the DeVos family, mobilized far-right organizations and armed militias to storm state capitals in Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and other states to demand an end to lockdowns and any other public health measures that undermined business activity. These efforts culminated in the January 6 coup attempt at the US Capitol aimed at installing a fascist government led by Donald Trump.

Biden insists on “unity” with Trump’s Republican co-conspirators while he pushes for the opening of schools in the midst of the pandemic.

To oppose this gang-up, teachers in Chicago and around the country are taking the fight to defend themselves and their communities out of the hands of the CTU and other unions, who are allied with Biden and the Democrats.

Last week, teachers formed the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which demands that schools be closed, that learning take place remotely, and that nonessential businesses be closed, with full compensation to workers and small businesses, until the pandemic is fully contained. Remote learning can be improved and carried out at a high level by providing every student and educator with state-of-the-art technology and smaller class sizes.

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 can sign up today at wsws.org/edsafety.



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