

# The Chicago teachers' rebellion and the fight to contain the pandemic

Evan Blake  
27 January 2021

On Saturday, over 20,000 Chicago educators voted overwhelmingly against the resumption of in-person learning, defying the campaign by Chicago Public Schools (CPS), Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot and the Biden administration to reopen schools even as more than 3,000 people in the US die each day from COVID-19.

The drive to reopen schools has become the focal point of the class struggle in the United States. Facing an incipient rebellion by educators threatening to break out of the control of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), on Tuesday Chicago Public Schools (CPS) was forced to temporarily back down from its aggressive push for fully in-person learning even as COVID-19 runs rampant. While CPS and the CTU work to hash out a deal the union feels it can sell to its members, the third largest school district in the country has switched to fully remote learning.

The resistance of Chicago educators is seen as a threat by the entire ruling class, as opening schools is the linchpin to the campaign to force workers back on the job amid a raging pandemic.

In order to maximize profits, schools must be reopened to ensure that parents return to unsafe workplaces. It is for this reason alone that the Biden administration and politicians from both parties are pressing to reopen schools across the country with the support of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the National Education Association (NEA), and all of their state and local affiliates.

Acutely aware of the militancy among educators, the corporate media and political establishment are engaged in a frenzied propaganda campaign to vilify teachers and distort science.

The most naked expression of the ruling class perspective came from the *Wall Street Journal*, which has been the most consistent advocate of “herd immunity”—the policy of allowing COVID-19 to run rampant throughout the population.

On Monday, the *Journal*'s Editorial Board denounced Chicago teachers as “self-serving,” declaring, “Seventy-one percent of CTU voting members rejected a return to in-person learning until schools are ‘safe’—meaning whenever teachers feel like going back.”

The *Journal* criticized the city for backing down in the face of mounting opposition by teachers, declaring “Haven't district leaders read the children's book ‘If You Give a Mouse a Cookie?’ Accommodating unreasonable demands leads to more unreasonable demands.”

The utter contempt for teachers voiced in these lines expresses the ruling class hatred of all workers, whose lives mean nothing to them. The *Journal* contemptuously dismisses the “safe” conditions demanded by educators at a time when every day over 3,000 people die from COVID-19 and roughly 175,000 become infected in the US, while more infectious and lethal variants of the virus spread undetected throughout the country.

Throughout the pandemic, the *Journal* has written numerous articles supporting the “Swedish model” of letting the virus rip through the population with no safety measures whatsoever, which has left Sweden with one of the highest per capita death rates in the world.

On May 4, when the death toll in the US stood at 71,447, the *Journal* wrote, “American governors should study the Swedish model as they begin relaxing statewide lockdowns.” On August 3, the *Journal* justified the initial reopening of schools, denouncing protesting teachers for engaging in “political extortion.”

Today, as the death toll in the US stands at 435,387, the *Journal* continues to write endless sophistries to justify a policy that subordinates life to profit.

The other major voice of the US political establishment, the *New York Times*, published an article Sunday by Erica Green titled, “Surge of Student Suicides Pushes Las Vegas Schools to Reopen.” The article presents the reopening of schools as a response to the mental health crisis confronting young people.

This is a lie. The campaign to reopen schools is not about the well-being of students, but maximizing what the *Times* itself called “labor force participation.” Earlier this month, Brian Deese, Biden's incoming director of the National Economic Council, let the cat out of the bag when he said, “We need to get the schools open so that parents... can get back to work.”

Green expresses in a different form the same argument first advanced by the *Times*' Thomas Friedman that “the cure can't be worse than the disease,” i.e. that preserving human life cannot become an obstacle to generating profits. This became the central slogan of the Trump administration to reopen nonessential workplaces and then schools last summer.

These articles are a small sample of the deluge of media propaganda seeking to justify school reopenings in recent weeks.

On Tuesday, the print and broadcast media seized upon two reports by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) officials to falsely claim that schools do not contribute to the spread of COVID-19.

One report, published in the CDC's *Morbidity Weekly Report* (MMWR) focuses solely on 17 schools in rural Wisconsin with small class sizes, with the disclaimer that the authors were "unable to rule out asymptomatic transmission within the school setting because surveillance testing was not conducted."

The report absurdly claims, "COVID-19 outbreaks related to kindergarten through grade 12 (K-12) classroom settings have been rarely reported." The second report similarly states, "there has been little evidence that schools have contributed meaningfully to increased community transmission."

The authors of both reports ignore the basic facts that over 2.7 million children have tested positive for COVID-19 in the US and that the massive upsurge of the pandemic began in November, coinciding with the steady reopening of schools throughout the fall. They neglect to mention that at least 530 K-12 teachers in the US have succumbed to the virus over the past year.

The CDC reports omit the numerous studies which show that closing schools is one of the most effective measures to contain the pandemic. Most recently, a study published in *Science* magazine surveying 41 countries found that closing schools and universities is the second-most effective intervention that governments have taken worldwide. A study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in July estimated that closing US schools at the start of the pandemic saved over 40,000 lives.

These claims also omit the data compiled by data scientist and whistleblower Rebekah Jones through the COVID Monitor, the only comprehensive tracker of outbreaks in K-12 schools in the US, which reports at least 505,068 COVID-19 infections among students and staff.

While Trump and the Republicans first spearheaded the reopening of schools, the Biden administration has now taken up this mantle. Late last year, the Trump administration pressured the CDC to declare that schools did not contribute to the spread of COVID-19, in an advisory that was widely dismissed as tainted by political bias.

But now, it is the Biden administration that is leading the drive to reopen schools, pressuring public health agencies to come up with data to claim that reopening schools is safe.

Commenting on the government's efforts to deny that schools are major sources of the spread of COVID-19, Jones told the *World Socialist Web Site* in a tweet Tuesday, "It's political interference in science, and it's wrong whether it comes from Ron Desantis in Florida or Joe Biden in Washington. Schools cause spread. 500k k12 cases and counting."

The working class must reject with contempt the lying arguments advanced by the media and the political establishment to steamroll them back into unsafe classrooms and workplaces.

In their struggle against school reopenings, Chicago educators are consciously fighting to protect their students, their families, themselves and all of society. Their struggle is the antipode to the homicidal indifference of the ruling class expressed by the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times*.

Coinciding with the struggle in Chicago, in Montgomery, Alabama, dozens of educators mounted a sickout on Monday after the district continued in-person learning despite the fact that four educators died from COVID-19 last week alone. This action

~~forced~~ the district to ~~reconsider~~ and within hours announce that schools will switch to fully remote learning on February 1.

Educators and all workers are on a collision course with the Biden administration and the entire ruling class, which are determined to reopen schools regardless of the impact on educators, students, parents and the broader working class. They also confront enemies in the teachers unions, including the CTU and other "radical" locals, all of which have acquiesced to school reopenings or reached sellout agreements with the Democrats in New York City, Houston, Boston, Baltimore, Washington DC, Detroit, Salt Lake City, Michigan, Washington, Oregon, California and numerous other cities and states.

Throughout the country, teachers and other education workers are determined to oppose the homicidal policies of the ruling class. Educators in Chicago, Alabama, New York City, Michigan, California, Texas, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee have formed a network of rank-and-file safety committees, wholly independent of the unions and both capitalist parties, which are preparing for a nationwide political general strike.

Every effort must be made to broaden these committees among all workers, in the US and internationally, to develop a unified movement of the working class fighting for its own interests.

All schools and nonessential workplaces must be immediately closed! Remote learning must be fully funded and all workers must be provided with the resources they need! The \$3.9 trillion amassed by the world's pandemic profiteers during the pandemic must be expropriated and used to fund these social programs!

Ultimately, the struggle facing educators and all workers is a global struggle against the capitalist system itself. No matter how many people are killed or families destroyed by COVID-19, the capitalists will brook no letup in the extraction of profits. Only through the socialist transformation of society and the placing of human needs before private profit will the working class be able to put an end to the pandemic and reorganize society on the basis of social equality.



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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