

# Chicago teachers lead resistance to Biden's school reopening plan as pandemic enters deadlier phase

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*We call on all educators, parents and students in Chicago and across the country to join the national network of educators rank-and-file safety committees and to attend our next meeting on Saturday, January 30, at 1 p.m. EST (12 p.m. CST).*

In the face of a national campaign by the Biden administration and the media to reopen schools, Chicago teachers and support staff are leading the resistance of educators across the US against the resumption of in-class instruction as the pandemic enters a new and deadlier phase.

Last Saturday, Chicago teachers voted by 71 percent not to return for in-person instruction, which Chicago Public Schools (CPS) resumed January 4, and to strike if the district retaliated against teachers defying orders to return to classrooms on Monday. Confronting a direct battle with 23,000 educators in the nation's third largest school district, Mayor Lori Lightfoot and school officials backed off threats to punish teachers for "illegally striking" and set a new deadline for K-8 teachers to return to classrooms on Wednesday. CPS was forced to backtrack again on Wednesday and cancel Thursday's return to classrooms.

January has been the deadliest month of the COVID-19 pandemic in the US, with more than 80,000 deaths so far. More infectious and lethal variants of the virus have been detected in 28 states and are forecast to become dominant by March. The new CDC director, Dr. Rochelle Walensky, reported Wednesday that the death toll would hit the horrifying mark of half a million by February 20.

With vaccine shortages delaying the widespread inoculation of the population until late summer or the fall, the shutting down of schools and nonessential workplaces is the most essential measure to save lives. But Biden, who said there would be more than 600,000 deaths before the US begins "to turn the corner in a major way," has declared that he wants all K-8 students back in school by mid-April. This is critical, he said, to put "millions of people back to work," including "[a]ll those mothers and fathers that are home,

taking care of their children rather than go to work, even when they can work."

Biden, whose wife hosted the leaders of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA) at a White House meeting last week, is counting on the unions to facilitate school reopenings so his administration can avoid a direct confrontation with teachers, which would further expose the anti-working class character of his administration and the Democratic Party.

Throughout this week, the corporate media have released a barrage of news reports and editorials claiming schools are safe and denouncing the Chicago teachers, with the *Wall Street Journal* insisting they are holding students "hostage." But scientific studies in the US and throughout the world have proven that schools are major contributors to the spread of COVID-19, and that children can suffer death or lifelong damage if infected.

An NBC Nightly News segment Wednesday reported a new spike among four- to six-year-olds of COVID-19-related Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in Children (MIS-C), which has already killed dozens of children and left others with severe organ damage in 47 states.

Mayor Lightfoot is engaged in frenzied behind-the-scenes negotiations with the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) to reach a deal before the district's February 1 deadline for the return of 10,000 educators and 71,000 K-8 students. For their part, CTU officials have called for a mediator to intervene in negotiations and have outlined a series of meager demands as the basis for a return-to-work agreement.

According to a post on the union's web site, these include "a health metric based on CDC guidance, a phased reopening, access to vaccinations for educators, and enforceable safety standards in school buildings, which have struggled to meet even basic needs for PPE, adequate ventilation and clean facilities." But such a deal would jeopardize both teachers as well as children and their

families.

It is far from guaranteed that Chicago's 23,000 educators will be able to get even one vaccine dose given the fact that the city has been receiving only 34,000 per week and there are roughly 660,000 health care, transit and other "essential" workers in the same vaccination priority group as teachers. Even if that is the case, returning students who are not being vaccinated will still be able to infect one another, accelerating the spread of the virus throughout working class communities.

The CTU gave the district weeks to blackmail teachers back to work and a free hand to victimize many of the 900 pre-K and cluster teachers who refused to return on January 4 by docking their pay and locking them out of their computer accounts, preventing them from teaching remotely.

Jake, an elementary school teacher and one of the approximately 150 teachers locked out by CPS, told the WSWS, "We were just their test animals. It was like, 'Let's see if they don't get sick.' But I don't want to be their experiment. How can they deep clean every school like they say they are going to do, when they don't even have soap, paper towels or working hand dryers."

Jake contracted COVID-19 early last month and said, "I couldn't leave the bed for ten days. I had trouble breathing. It sucked. There's so many at risk. The kids. The adults. No one should get sick. The only way to contain this is not to go back right now."

Addressing educators across the US and internationally, he added, "We go there every day and fight for the kids. The people higher up are just playing with us. And they've caused division between us teachers. We're doing what's right. Whether we're in the school district where we have to be back in person, or whether we are locked out at CPS, we're in it together," he said, adding, "We're in for a long battle."

Another Chicago teacher commented, "Last night the mayor explained that it's not fair that teachers aren't in-person because so many others have been at risk of exposure at work for so long. What? What good does spreading the risk of exposure to educators, students and by extension all involved families do except to protect businesses that should be liable for putting workers at risk of exposure? It's just a bad and corrupt plan on so many levels."

She added, "Teachers are literally fodder for the economic mill. In Chicago, teachers must live in the city—so teachers are funding banks through home loan interest, the city through property taxes, the food corporations when they spend money for food and essentials here, and recently minted teachers are owned by their student loans. The picket line is a terrible way to spend the day but if you or a loved one dies or is permanently disabled because of COVID, the

day becomes infinitely worse."

A high school teacher in Connecticut told the WSWS, "I support Chicago teachers. This whole situation has been very ugly across the country. The shame is so real for me as an educator. I'm embarrassed at how poorly we're valued."

Protests, sickouts and other job actions took place this week in New Jersey, Alabama, Georgia and other states. In Montgomery, Alabama, after weeks of protests, rank-and-file teachers organized sickouts Monday, forcing the district to adopt remote-only learning starting February 1 after four state educators died from COVID-19 in the space of 48 hours last week. The Democratic-led district, however, is already renegeing on plans to order teachers back into schools so their remote instruction can be monitored. In Montclair, New Jersey, protests by teachers, parents and students forced the district to scrap plans to resume in-person instruction Monday.

Educators in Chicago, New York City, Los Angeles, along with Alabama, Texas, Tennessee, Pennsylvania, California and Michigan have formed rank-and-file safety committees to take the conduct of the fight out of the hands of the unions, which are allied with Biden and the Democrats.

This is part of the international resistance of educators, parents and students to the homicidal reopening of schools. Rank-and-file committees have also been established in Germany, the UK, Australia and other countries, while educators in Ontario, Canada, have begun to mount protests against school reopenings.

In every country, these committees are fighting for the preparation of general strikes to demand the closure of all schools and non-essential workplaces, full income protection for workers and small businesses, and the reallocation of the trillions amassed by the pandemic profiteers to instead fully fund remote learning, rapidly distribute vaccines globally and put an end to poverty and inequality.



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