

Chicago teachers struggle at a crossroads

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The drive to reopen Chicago Public Schools (CPS), the third largest school district in the country, has become a pitched battle between educators and the state apparatus, the latter backed up by the corporate media and the unions. The fight by Chicago educators to prevent the reopening of schools is the focal point of the class struggle in the United States, with every other major district in the country looking to Chicago to set a precedent.

In this context, it is of the utmost importance for teachers and other educators to organize independently of the unions and join the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, as well as attend this Saturday's national meeting of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which will bring together the network of committees that have formed across the country, as well as committee members in the UK and Germany.

Resisting the campaign by the Biden administration and the media to reopen schools, Chicago educators are leading the struggle against the resumption of in-person instruction as the pandemic enters a new and deadlier phase. Underscoring the stakes involved are recent reports of the presence of more transmissible and possibly deadlier variants of the coronavirus in Chicago and around the country.

Already, after the “phased” reopening of schools implemented by CPS with the acquiescence of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) since the start of the year, it was reported Thursday that Marshall High School custodian and SEIU Local 73 member Marcus Young had died from COVID-19. The CTU has reported that there have already been over 150 infections in Chicago schools since the reopening process began on January 4.

Additionally, even though there are no plans to vaccinate children in the immediate future, there are worrying reports of a new spike among four- to six-

year-old children 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.

The stakes involved in Chicago are indicated in part by today's teachers union-hosted “Fireside Chat” with Dr. Anthony Fauci, featuring American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten and National Education Association (NEA) President Becky Pringle. Clearly suggesting the importance of restarting in-person education, Fauci said, “We’re not going to get back to normal until we get children back into school, both for the good of the children, for the good of the parents, and for the good of the community.”

Although Fauci suggested it was important to “get teachers vaccinated as quickly as we possibly can,” he indicated schools might be able to “intermittently survey the students, the teachers, the staff” with rapid antigen tests to “get a feel of what the penetrance of infection is.”

While CPS officials have been forced to temporarily back down from plans to force teachers into classrooms this week, they remain aggressively committed to reopening schools for in-person instruction on Monday, with CPS CEO Janice Jackson telling WBEZ, “We expect students and staff to be in school on Monday.”

Even though the district told families who opted for in-person learning to stay home and allowed teachers access to their district-provided Google accounts and virtual classrooms, principals have been told to deny or retract “telework” approvals for teachers, which would result in a loss of pay. In response to this flagrantly illegal retaliation—which should trigger a strike, according to the resolution overwhelmingly approved by educators last Saturday—the CTU has merely called for people with lost pay to report it to the union so they can be added to a grievance.

A CPS teacher who works on the South Side noted, “There are Pre-K and cluster teachers who have been locked out for a couple weeks and are still out. We are waiting on the union. They’ve been abandoned. If we don’t strike, and teachers tomorrow are still locked out, we have a major solidarity issue to deal with.”

In fact, the CTU is responsible for the biggest attacks on worker solidarity through their acquiescence to the reopenings, which saw Pre-K and special education cluster program teachers ordered back into classrooms on January 4. Far from preparing for a strike to put an end to the dangerous reopening plans, the CTU is doing everything it can to avoid a strike, which could easily get out of its control and begin raising much more radical demands.

For that reason, the union jumped on the Wednesday ruling by Cook County Judge Raymond Mitchell, who refused to grant an injunction to suburban Cicero School District 99 ordering teachers back into school buildings. Like their counterparts in Chicago, Cicero educators have refused orders to report to school buildings and have continued to teach remotely. In his ruling, Mitchell wrote:

“I can accept the premise that in-person teaching is preferable to remote learning, just as I can accept the notion that in-person court proceedings are preferable to remote proceedings. But I also recognize that there are countervailing public health considerations that prompted us to resort to remote proceedings in the first instance. We are all anxious to return to ‘normal,’ but maintaining the status quo relative to remote learning while teachers are vaccinated hardly seems an exigent circumstance requiring injunctive relief.”

The reality is CTU is trying to work out with the district some kind of “phased-in” reopening, which would see teachers brought into schools after they are able to receive a first dose of the vaccine. A plan along these lines has also been floated by Chicago Principals & Administrators Association President Troy LaRaviere, who has suggested that the district should open only 50 to 100 schools as a pilot, and prioritize workers at those schools for vaccines.

Educators should beware, such a “phase-in” will not adequately protect educators or other CPS staff from becoming gravely ill or even dying, and it places students, their families and the wider community at enormous risk of further infections and deaths.

The CTU wants nothing more than to work out a miserable settlement it can sell to teachers, and union leaders have also been working to convince the membership that their negotiations have led to a safer reopening plan. In a remarkable graphic, CTU touts the latest district proposals, which remain completely inadequate and unscientific, as proof of their hard work.

The critical question facing Chicago educators is the need to organize independently of the CTU and the Democratic Party, which are carrying out the reopening campaign on behalf of the financial aristocracy. Instead, educators must orient themselves towards other sections of the working class who face the same deadly conditions.

Beneath the surface, there is an enormous radicalization taking place among workers and a striving to put an end to the homicidal policies imposed by the ruling elites. This opposition must be guided by a conscious leadership and organized through a network of independent rank-and-file committees at every workplace and neighborhood, which are democratically controlled by workers themselves and committed to prosecuting the class struggle in the interests of the entire working class.

Preparations for a nationwide general strike must be widely discussed and developed among educators and all workers through these rank-and-file committees. Such a strike would have wide reverberations internationally and is the only means through which the working class can contain the pandemic and save hundreds of thousands of lives in the coming months. There is not a moment to lose! Sign up to get involved today at wsws.org/edsafety!



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