

Negotiations stall in Chicago amid nationwide campaign to open schools

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For the past month, the nationwide, bipartisan effort to force a return to in-person learning has centered on the country's third largest school district, Chicago Public Schools (CPS). The resistance of rank-and-file educators in the city has inspired educators and huge sections of workers across the US and globally. Every effort is being made by the political establishment and the bourgeois media to vilify Chicago educators and wear down their opposition, to pave the way for mass school reopenings at the most dangerous stage of the pandemic in the interests of corporate profits.

On January 4, CPS began a "phased" reopening of schools with the cooperation of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU). The CTU has reported that there have already been over 150 infections in Chicago schools since schools began reopening. On Thursday, it was reported that Marshall High School custodian and SEIU Local 73 member Marcus Young died from COVID-19. Only last week did the union finally take a vote to stop the deadly return to buildings and keep learning remote, which won overwhelming support among teachers and parents.

The CTU and CPS have been stalled in negotiations for the past week, attempting to reach an agreement that the union feels they can sell to their members. CPS CEO Janice Jackson made public statements throughout the week indicating her expectation that some 71,000 K-8 students will return to buildings on Monday, February 1, as the district has long planned. In response, parents and students are organizing a student sick out on Monday, refusing to send children back into dangerous buildings.

Late Friday evening, Chicago's Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot held a press conference to announce that no deal had been reached with the CTU. The union also issued a statement declaring negotiations had fallen apart.

In her brief remarks, Lightfoot said that a deal is within reach. She commented, "We need to get it done," and added that teachers "need to be there" in buildings on Monday. Lightfoot pledged to take action if teachers do not report to buildings on Monday, but did not elaborate.

The CTU continues to advocate a phased reopening of

schools, but on a more extended timeline, in which teachers should first be vaccinated. This unscientific position will not adequately protect educators or other CPS staff, and places students, their families and the wider community at enormous risk of further infections and deaths.

Under these conditions, it is urgent that teachers and other education workers organize independently of the unions, join the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, and attend this Saturday's national meeting of the network of Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees across the US, and in the UK and Germany.

As CPS teachers and students worked remotely again on Friday, the district instructed principals to continue to refuse their telework requests, meaning that some teachers are working unpaid and must file a grievance to get paid for those days. The district and union have not publicly stated how many of the more than 100 teachers who have been locked out since January 11 remain locked out.

Numerous statements from Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot, along with Biden administration officials, the President himself, and Democratic state and local leaders all underscore that the aim of reopening schools is to get workers back to work. In this the Democrats enjoy the support of the teachers unions, led by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA).

A critical lesson to be drawn from the experience of the pandemic is that the lives and health of teachers and the entire working class do not matter to the capitalist class. This has been further laid bare by the aggressive propaganda campaign aimed at wearing down social opposition to reopening schools, demanding the working class simply accept the illness and death that will follow.

There have been dozens of right-wing articles denouncing Chicago teachers over the past week.

In a representative column published in the *New York Times* Friday, David Brooks turned reality on its head by stating, "There's a wave of anti-intellectualism sweeping America. There are people across the country who deny

evidence, invent their own facts and live in their own fantasyland. We saw it in the Republicans who denied the reality of the Biden election victory and we see it now in the teachers unions that are shutting down schools and marring children's lives."

The "facts" are that the reopening of schools is a criminally reckless endeavor. Over 2.7 million children have tested positive for COVID-19 in the US, coinciding with the steady reopening of schools throughout the fall. At least 530 K-12 teachers in the US have succumbed to the virus over the past year. 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.

The vast majority of students in the largest districts that have reopened, including Chicago and New York City, have not returned to classrooms due to widespread recognition of the risks to their lives and health. Parents and teachers know the official claims of air purifiers, PPE and "social distancing" for young children in old and ill-maintained buildings are politically motivated nonsense.

The reason Chicago has taken on such enormous significance is because educators have openly defied the dictates of the Democratic Party. In reopening the third largest district in the country, Lightfoot is trying to set a precedent to facilitate the implementation of Biden's plan across the country.

Beyond Chicago, there is a concerted push students and teachers back into buildings in every major school district in the US. Four of the eleven largest school districts in the country are currently pursuing reopening: Chicago, Los Angeles, Las Vegas and Fairfax County, Virginia.

The largest school district in the country, New York City, reopened in the fall, the first among Democrat-led cities. This was followed by Democrat-led Houston, the seventh-largest district, which reopened in October. Democratic officials in Los Angeles pushed to reopen the second largest district in the country throughout the fall, which was only halted in December when the city became the epicenter of the pandemic.

On Wednesday, LA County Public Health Department Director Barbara Ferrer declared that the district's elementary schools could reopen within two to three weeks if new infection rates continue to decline. In order for Pre-K through 6th grade classrooms to reopen, the seven-day average of daily cases only has to be below 25 or fewer per 100,000 residents, which is still a highly elevated figure.

Clark County School District, which covers the Las Vegas metro region and is the fifth largest school district in the US, recently reached a deal with the Clark County Education Association that was approved by the school board on

January 14. The current timeline is for Pre-K through 3rd grade teachers to begin returning to their classrooms on February 22, with their students returning the following week on March 1. The district aims to have all 315,000 students and 42,000 employees back in classrooms by the end of the year.

Fairfax County School District, the 11th largest in the US, has also pressed to reopen in recent weeks. Superintendent Dr. Scott Brabrand aims to send students back to class on February 16, with the goal of having 100,000 students across multiple grade levels in class by March 9.

If the drive to reopen these four major districts is successful, along with others in Maryland and North Carolina, then by March the 17 largest schools in the US would offer in-person learning. The reopening of these districts and hundreds of other smaller districts in every region of the country, which the Democrats and unions are conspiring to implement, would vastly accelerate the spread of the pandemic and have devastating consequences for the working class.

More than 447,000 people have now died from COVID-19 in the US, and over 2,216,000 around the world. There is no limit to the capitalist class' tolerance for death and social dislocation from COVID-19. What they will not tolerate is any brake on the extraction of profits from working people.

The struggle of educators, parents and students to keep learning online until the pandemic is contained and vaccines are widespread must form part of a broader set of demands to unite the working class in defense of its lives and safety. These must include the provision of economic support for households and small businesses, a massive investment in education to fund remote learning and lower class sizes, and universal access to free, high quality healthcare.

To achieve these aims requires the broadest possible mobilization of the entire working class—including manufacturing, health care, logistics and service workers—in a nationwide general strike. The Socialist Equality Party is assisting in the formation and development of a network of independent rank-and-file committees among educators, autoworkers, Amazon workers, healthcare workers and others, to prepare for the massive struggles on the horizon. We urge all teachers and education workers to get involved and attend today's national meeting of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee.



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