

Chicago educators call for a strike as district threatens lockout

Evan Blake**1 February 2021**

The struggle of Chicago educators to prevent the deadly reopening of schools is intensifying each day and continues to be the focal point of the class struggle in the United States. In defying the dictates of the Chicago Democratic Party political machine headed by Mayor Lori Lightfoot, teachers and school workers are giving voice to the strivings of millions of workers across the US and globally to implement measures to contain the pandemic and save lives.

With schools slated to reopen Monday, Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot and Chicago Public Schools (CPS) CEO Janice Jackson held a press conference Sunday evening in which they falsified science and threatened teachers to try to cow them into submission. Due to widespread opposition, including from parents and students, city and school officials acceded to teachers' demands to restrict classes to remote-only on Monday but insisted they conduct online instruction from school buildings or face retribution.

The 62,000 K-8 students district officials said would return to in-person classes Monday are being taught remotely today. The district has threatened to take punitive action against teachers who did not show up at buildings, locking them out of their Google Classroom accounts to prevent them from teaching remotely.

Lightfoot and Jackson no doubt have a direct line of communication with the White House, which is acutely aware of the importance of reopening the third largest district in the US to help Biden implement his stated goal to reopen all schools across the country. The Democratic president is pursuing this policy at the worst stage of the pandemic, as hospitals are saturated and more dangerous variants of COVID-19 spread largely undetected throughout the country.

After falsely claiming that CPS schools are "safe," Lightfoot menacingly declared Sunday, "We expect all of our teachers who have not received a specific accommodation to come to school tomorrow. Those who do not report to work, and I hate to even go there, but we're going to have to take action."

In an effort to drive a wedge between educators and parents, many of whom have organized a student sickout in support of teachers, Lightfoot also urged parents to send their children back to schools on Tuesday. Shortly after the press conference, CPS sent an email to all educators declaring that they will be

considered "absent without leave" and locked out of their Google Classroom accounts if they do not show up to schools on Monday.

The district previously sent the same email to Pre-K and cluster teachers, resulting in a lockout that the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) did nothing seriously to oppose. Facing enormous opposition from rank-and-file teachers, the CTU says that if CPS imposes a mass lockout they will call a House of Delegates meeting Monday night to vote on whether to strike, which could begin as early as Tuesday. The CTU has scheduled a press conference for noon today.

Immediately after the CPS press conference, the CTU held an online all-membership meeting which over 10,000 educators attended. Attendees left over 1,200 comments and questions in the chat, many of which were highly critical of the CTU. The union has been negotiating with CPS behind closed doors to try to reach a miserable compromise to unsafely reopen schools. They fully support Biden and the Democratic Party, which have emerged as the clear enemies of all educators.

At the meeting, CTU President Jesse Sharkey sought to disarm educators, stating, "The mayor just got done doing a press conference saying people have to come back on Monday and there are going to be consequences if people don't, but that's the same thing she said last week, and of course there weren't any, you know, people weren't locked out."

Sharkey repeated this multiple times, stating, "This is not the first time or even the second time they've threatened us and haven't acted on it" and "On Monday, tomorrow, we're working remotely, we're going to see what happens. Hopefully, they blink again," he concluded complacently.

The union's primary demands have been that teachers begin getting vaccinated before they're sent back into classrooms, and that the district close schools if the citywide test positivity rate surpasses a threshold that they're negotiating. Regarding the latter, Sharkey acknowledged that this condition could soon be met, stating, "You know, obviously, positivity rates are falling. I do think that the condition, we're getting to a place where they could say, okay, we could open school."

The demand that only teachers be vaccinated is totally unscientific and ignores the mountain of evidence that children in schools are major vectors for the spread of the virus

throughout communities. Having a citywide test positivity rate to trigger the closure of schools was the same criterion set by the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) in September to reopen schools in New York City, the largest school district in the country. When the threshold was passed in November, schools closed for less than a week before Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio unilaterally overrode the threshold and reopened schools, with full support from the UFT.

The sentiment among rank-and-file educators is diametrically opposed to that of Sharkey and the CTU bureaucracy. There are growing calls for immediate strike action to close all schools and fully fund remote learning until the pandemic is contained and the population is vaccinated.

One educator commented in the chat, “Can we please declare a strike already! Pre-k, cluster, clinicians and others continue to be lambs left to the slaughter! We will be the only ones declared AWOL tomorrow!”

Evidently concerned that the CTU will again do nothing if CPS locks out more teachers on Monday, as took place on January 12, another teacher asked, “How many members have to be locked out before we take action? I do not think that has been stated.”

In a revealing exchange, an educator wrote, “The Mayor and CEO just said that they are locking us out tomorrow at the end of the business day. Why not Strike tomorrow?” CTU official Chris Baehrend responded with soporifics, writing, “The Mayor has issued many threats that she has not followed through on, so let’s see.”

Also, on Sunday evening, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 73 announced they had reached an agreement with CPS. The union covers roughly 7,500 special education classroom assistants (SECAs), school bus drivers and aides, custodians, security guards and other support staff, many of whom have returned to schools since the phased-in openings began on January 4.

The agreement states, “SECAs can continue working from home until an agreement is reached between CPS and CTU on resuming in-person instruction.” The deal, however, gives the district full latitude to deny requests for health accommodations from at-risk workers or those with at-risk family members. The SEIU also pledges to be a strikebreaker should CTU members go on strike, stating, “If there’s a work stoppage, SECAs, Bus Aides, parent workers, and bus monitors who remain available to work can continue to work remotely without loss in pay,” the deal states.

Since CPS began the “phased” reopening of schools on January 4 with the collusion of the CTU and SEIU there have already been over 150 infections in Chicago schools. Last Thursday, it was reported that Marshall High School custodian and SEIU Local 73 member Marcus Young died from COVID-19.

In their battle to defend the health and lives of students, their families, themselves and all workers, Chicago educators are in

a direct confrontation with the entire political establishment and their backers in the trade unions and corporate media.

The Biden administration has repeatedly stated that its primary goal is to resume in-person learning at the majority of all schools by the end of April, with the sole purpose of getting parents back to work to produce corporate profits. Speaking on NBC-TV’s *Meet the Press* program Sunday, Biden’s top economic adviser Brian Deese bluntly stated, “We have to get the schools reopened so that parents can go back to work.”

In his campaign to open schools Biden also has the support of the so-called progressive Bernie Sanders who told ABC-TV’s *This Week* Sunday, “We cannot have ... schools not open. We need to open our schools in a safe way.”

There is widespread support to link up the fight of teachers with broader sections of the working class. Factories, warehouses, construction sites, public transit and other workplaces, along with nursing homes and schools, are where the largest outbreaks are occurring.

Only the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which was formed last month independently of the unions and both big business parties, is fighting for the closure of all schools and nonessential businesses, full compensation for all workers and parents who remain home, and for a massive allocation of resources for high quality remote learning, assistance to parents and students and massively ramping up the production and distribution of vaccines. Our committee is coordinating with a growing network of such rank-and-file committees across the US to prepare for a nationwide general strike to close all schools and nonessential workplaces.

In the latest national meeting of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee held on Saturday, a veteran Chicago teacher and member of the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee declared, “The unions are not going to protect all of us. Joining the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is how we must fight. This is why only we can defend ourselves. No one is going to save us. There must be a nationally coordinated response to stop all the reopenings independent of unions.”

The fate of this struggle cannot be left in the hands of the CTU. Preparations must be made to oppose whatever sellout agreement is reached between the union and the district, and to organize the broadest strike action involving educators, parents and all workers throughout the region and nationally. We urge all Chicago educators to sign up today to join and help build the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to wage this fight.



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