

# Chicago educators call for strike as district continues threats

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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 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 that the district officials said would return to in-person classes Monday were instead taught remotely. By the late afternoon, after previously threatening to lock teachers out of their Google Classroom accounts to prevent them from teaching remotely, the district backed off. Officials then declared school would be remote for Tuesday and Wednesday and that no lockouts would occur while the district continues to negotiate with the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU).

Lightfoot told the *Chicago Tribune* she has been in direct discussions with the White House. The Biden administration is acutely aware of the importance of reopening the third largest district in the country to 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.

Asked at a news briefing about Biden's position on the situation in Chicago, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said Biden has "enormous respect for Mayor Lightfoot," underscoring his support for the mayor's vicious threats against teachers for a supposed "illegal strike." Psaki then made it clear the president was relying on the CTU to cut a deal to impose the back-to-school order.

The president, Psaki said, "trusts the mayor and the unions to work this out. They're both prioritizing the right things, which is ensuring the health and safety of the kids and teachers and working to make sure that children in Chicago are getting the education they deserve. So, he is hopeful—we are hopeful—they can reach common ground as soon as possible."

The reality, however, is that there is no "common ground" between the teachers on one side and Biden and Lightfoot on the other. The

political establishment and the corporate interests the Democrats serve are committed to sending teachers and students back into classrooms in order to protect the wealth of the financial aristocracy. Teachers are opposed to this and are speaking for tens of millions of educators and workers across the country who understand the danger posed by a return to school buildings while the pandemic still rages.

After admitting that she was in constant touch with the Biden administration, Lightfoot absurdly claimed "these issues are a uniquely local issue," even though the eyes of educators as well as local and school officials across the US are focused on Chicago. She added, "We are very, very close, and we can get there if the union takes some steps in our direction."

While offering the carrot to the CTU officials, she is backing this up with the stick of further reprisals against teachers. 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."

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 school on Monday.

A veteran Chicago teacher and member of the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee said, "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 the unions."

Educators and other workers across the country have denounced these threats. An Oklahoma teacher, who was part of the 2018 statewide strike, indicated the explosive nature of the reopening of schools, "Every single student has been invited BACK for school in our rural community as we've had an A/B schedule (alphabetically split population) since approx late Sept-Oct. that schedule allowed approximately 7-10 kids per room— sized 25X25. A wave of unrest is coming in relation to the 'Back to school' announcement from our Superintendent. I fully support Chicago teachers because this is where we all need to be. In Oklahoma it is naked herd immunity and mass murder. In Chicago it's being done by the Democrats. Same game different party name."

A group of Tennessee teachers who have formed a rank-and-file safety committee, which operates independently of the unions, wrote: "The Tennessee Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee stands in

solidarity with our sister and brother educators in the Chicago Public Schools. CPS rank-and-file educators are currently fighting for their lives on three fronts: they are fighting for their lives against a deadly pandemic that has already claimed over 450,000 American lives in 10 months; they are fighting for their lives against an exploitative political and economic system that is willing to distort science and obfuscate facts in order to send teachers back into classrooms for profits; and they are fighting for their lives against their own union, the CTU, which agrees with the Democratic Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot that schools should reopen during a pandemic without community-wide inoculation against COVID-19 instead of upholding the demands and protecting the lives of their own rank-and-file members.

“As you stand together, arm in arm in the fight for your lives, know that Tennessee teachers are banding together in a rank-and-file committee to stand against our delusional governor, degenerate legislators and spineless local administrators as they coerce educators back into classrooms. As you bravely countenance the homicidal threats to your livelihoods, professionalism and well-being from your leaders, know that educators and workers in cities across the country and throughout the world are coming together in rank-and-file committees to fight against injustice in their workplaces. As you turn your backs on your dissembling union, the CTU, know that you, the rank and file, are entreating every teacher, every health care worker, every service industry worker, every worker who is being sacrificed by the insatiable oligarchs for their profits, to form rank-and-file committees independent of their feckless unions.”

A veteran worker at Ford Chicago Assembly Plant stated his support for the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee’s demands. “Stopping the virus should be first. Safety is first for everyone: teachers and students and any one in a school building. Students can still learn [from home] if the parents get involved,” he told the *World Socialist Web Site*.

“It’s messed up, this whole situation with the virus,” he continued. “The government, the unions, the mayor, the big companies, the auto industry—it’s all about money—not kids, not autoworkers’ safety. Not people’s health.”

Immediately after Sunday’s 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 are sent back into the classrooms, and that the district close schools if the citywide test positivity rate surpasses a

threshold that they are 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 the UFT’s full support.

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 deal gives the district full latitude to deny requests for health accommodations from at-risk workers or those with at-risk family members and pledges that its members will be sent into the schools even if teachers strike.

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.

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.

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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