

Chicago teachers take a stand to save lives over profits

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A critical struggle is now unfolding in Chicago, which has vast significance for workers across the United States and internationally. Educators are determined to prevent the deadly reopening of schools in the third largest school district in the US, placing them in direct conflict with the Democratic Party and the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), which are negotiating for this reopening to begin as soon as possible.

In countries throughout the world that have been ravaged by the COVID-19 pandemic, the ruling elites are seeking to reopen schools in order to compel parents to go back to work. On Monday, schools in São Paulo, Brazil began reopening, sending potentially over two million students back into classrooms, even as virulent new strains of the virus spread throughout the country. Similar homicidal policies are being pursued in Germany, Britain and across Europe, and dozens of other countries around the world.

Due to the global character of this campaign, the working class internationally must mobilize to unite with Chicago educators and carry out the broadest struggle possible in defense of the lives and safety of the working class.

On Monday evening, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) CEO Janice Jackson and Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot announced that there would be a 48-hour “cooling off” period to forestall a teachers’ strike. Having reached a compromise with the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) on an unspecified aspect of their plan to reopen schools, Lightfoot and Jackson stated that “as a gesture of good faith, for now, teachers will retain access to their Google Suite”—that is, they will not be locked out of online teaching.

Nothing will change in the coming days between the CPS and CTU, which are in basic agreement that schools should reopen at the worst stage of the pandemic. The only significant change during that time will be that more

than 300,000 people will become infected and at least 6,000 more people will die from COVID-19 across the US.

With the COVID-19 death toll in the US standing at 454,213, after 97,917 people died in January, as more infectious variants of the virus spread largely undetected throughout the country, and as growing numbers of children become hospitalized and die from the virus, the Democratic Party is relentlessly pursuing school reopenings in the interests of Wall Street.

CPS and the CTU are in regular communication with the Biden administration, whose central policy proposal is to reopen the majority of schools by the end of April. They are all acutely aware that the opposition among educators threatens to break out of their control and spark a wave of resistance among all workers across the US and globally. For this reason, the district and the union are biding their time and isolating Chicago teachers until they feel they can reach an agreement to reopen the schools.

The very fact that Lightfoot issued a threat to “take action” against teachers must be taken as a sharp warning. The Democrats in Chicago, in coordination with the White House, are preparing to brutally suppress Chicago teachers through lockouts, fines, mass firings and other punitive actions if they cannot promptly come to an agreement with the union.

The threat by Lightfoot and the response from the CTU evoke the events of 1981, when a similar attack was implemented by the state and went unanswered by the unions. The year 2021 marks 40 years since Ronald Reagan smashed the strike by 13,000 Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) workers, who demanded a shorter workweek, increased wages and more staffing to reduce the extreme stress of their jobs.

The struggle by the PATCO workers was isolated and betrayed by the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, which refused to mobilize its millions of members in a broader struggle

despite persistent calls among workers for a general strike.

As with the present conflict in Chicago and the wave of teachers' strikes since 2018, the PATCO strike marked a major turning point in the history of the American working class and signaled a direct confrontation between the working class and the capitalist state. The fact that today educators and all workers confront the Democratic Party instead of the Republicans underscores the basic Marxist understanding that both parties serve the interests of the capitalist class.

The defeat of the PATCO strike initiated a rightward shift among all unions in the US, ushering in decades of unending betrayals and the suppression of the class struggle. It was a profound shock to workers in the US and globally, paving the way for union-busting and the defeats of major strikes at Phelps Dodge, Greyhound, Hormel, Caterpillar and many other workplaces.

The program of the unions, based on nationalism and reformism, was completely undermined by globalization and the ability of transnational corporations to shift production to wherever they could find the lowest wages and most brutal exploitation.

During this time, all the teachers unions were integrated into the Democratic Party, to the point where American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten now sits on the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and has close relations with First Lady Jill Biden. Millions of teachers today were not born at the time that PATCO took place, but they are faced with the consequences of this betrayal and confront the dire necessity of building new organizations to fight for their own independent interests.

Today, the working class is once again entering into struggle. When the state attacked the PATCO workers, the unions kept them isolated and unable to defend themselves. This must not happen again! Every effort must be made to build independent rank-and-file committees to serve as the workers' voice of opposition to the inevitable betrayals that the unions will attempt to impose.

The trade unions today—including pseudo-left locals such as the CTU—are no longer workers' organizations in any sense of the term. They have been transformed into instruments of the ruling class for suppressing the class struggle.

For educators globally, there is nothing to negotiate when it comes to reopening the schools, which poses an existential threat to their lives and safety, as well as that

of their students, their families and all of society. In the US alone, at least 689 active and retired K-12 educators and personnel have died of COVID-19, while over 2.7 million children have been infected with the virus.

Despite the endless barrage of corporate media propaganda claiming that schools can be "safely" reopened at present, the science of the pandemic unequivocally proves that this is a reckless and homicidal endeavor.

The coronavirus pandemic is now evolving into an immense social struggle, with Chicago teachers giving initial expression to the growing militancy among all workers. Increasingly, the confrontation between the two great classes in society—the working class and the capitalist class—is coming to the fore.

On January 6, fascists stormed the US Capitol in an attempt to establish a presidential dictatorship headed by Trump. Today, a far more powerful force is on the scene in Chicago.

The relentless assault on the working class over the past 40 years has been accompanied by the relentless promotion of racial, gender and sexual identity politics. The fact that Lori Lightfoot is now the face of the homicidal campaign to reopen the schools reaffirms that the decisive issue is class.

The struggle unfolding in Chicago is of monumental significance and must become the spearhead of a broader movement of the entire working class in a nationwide political general strike, which would send shock waves throughout the world and provoke similar struggles globally.

The Socialist Equality Party will make every effort to connect the struggle of Chicago educators with those of educators and every other section of the working class, across the US and globally. We will fight to provide the necessary leadership to guide these struggles to a successful conclusion, which will ultimately require the socialist overturn of existing property relations, a vast redistribution of wealth, and the rebuilding of society in the interests of the working class.



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