

As educators continue to resist, Chicago Teachers Union and district move closer to deal to reopen schools

Evan Blake
4 February 2021

The Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is holding its next meeting at 7pm CST tonight, February 4, to discuss how to mobilize opposition to the deadly reopening of schools. Register now and share this link with your coworkers to build the committee!

Late Wednesday evening, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and Chicago Public Schools (CPS) announced that they had made progress in their joint efforts to resume in-person learning in the third largest school district in the US at the worst stage of the COVID-19 pandemic. Reports have emerged that CTU delegates have begun contacting teachers and aim to put an agreement before teachers by the weekend.

In a menacing statement issued Wednesday night, CPS tweeted, “We will extend the cooling off period *for the final timethrough* the end of the day on Thursday to allow for further negotiations tonight” (emphasis added). Given that Friday is a preplanned nonattendance day, this threat indicates that the district aims to impose lockouts, fines and other punitive actions against educators on Monday should they reject a tentative agreement over the weekend.

This will vastly escalate the district’s divide-and-conquer strategy of locking out individual educators who refused to return as schools reopened throughout January, which the CTU has done nothing to oppose. One educator told the WSW, “My colleagues are still locked out, and they haven’t approved anyone’s timecards for the time that we’ve worked remotely and are not saying anything about payment.” In total, more than 100 educators remain locked out of their Google classroom accounts, preventing them from teaching their students.

Among rank-and-file Chicago educators, there is enormous opposition to the ruling class campaign to reopen schools and a wide recognition that this is solely in the interests of the financial elite. There are growing calls for a general strike in Chicago and across the US to close all schools and nonessential workplaces until the pandemic is contained.

Only 14 percent of Chicago teachers showed up to their classrooms Monday, with the vast majority defying Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot’s ultimatum and threats that she would “take action” against those engaged in an “illegal strike.” There is also huge support for teachers among parents, who had independently organized a sickout for Tuesday in the event that schools reopened.

The CTU is capitulating on every “demand” they claim to be fighting for, with the most significant shift being their acceptance that schools can reopen if the citywide test positivity rate is less than five percent, which will likely happen in the coming week.

Both sides are coming to an agreement that schools can reopen if 1,500 teachers are vaccinated weekly, a tiny fraction of the more than 23,000 educators in the CTU. The CTU has always promoted a phased-in reopening of schools as teachers become vaccinated. This completely unscientific policy would imperil masses of students, parents and the broader community, as schools have been proven to be vectors for the transmission of COVID-19 throughout their communities.

An educator in Chicago who wished to remain anonymous told the WSW, “The concessions are nauseating.” Another noted that even the vaccination demand is not realistic, stating, “The mayor is lying, saying that there is a robust vaccination plan. I’ve been really stressed because I haven’t been able to get vaccinated. Everywhere I look they say there aren’t appointments. I’m in Group 1B so I should be able to find a vaccine, and I can’t. It’s so overwhelming.”

Rank-and-file teachers and school workers should reject with contempt the miserable and deadly sellout that the CTU is plotting with the CPS behind closed doors! The reopening of schools is nonnegotiable and will only lead to a catastrophic rise in infections and deaths among educators, students, parents throughout the metro region.

We urge all Chicago teachers and school workers to join and help build the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety

Committee, to serve as the center of opposition to whatever deadly agreement is reached, and to broaden your struggle throughout the entire working class across the country.

The progress on negotiations was leaked during a CTU House of Delegates meeting in the 48th hour of the “cooling-off” period. It was announced late Monday night in an effort to avoid a strike that could spiral out of the CTU’s control and propel struggles among educators and workers across the US and internationally.

The fact that the union said nothing about the negotiations for two days underscores that they have been conspiring with city officials and the Biden administration to reopen the schools in the coming days and indicates that they are preparing to further cave in on their already unsafe set of demands. This is taking place as new, more infectious and lethal variants of COVID-19 spread largely undetected throughout the whole population.

Chicago educators must demand the immediate release of all information and transcripts from the more than 70 negotiation sessions that have taken place since last fall. The demand must be popularized that all future negotiations be live-streamed and broadcast to the public. What are the CTU and CPS hiding, and what deadly deal are they cooking up?

The drive to reopen schools is being orchestrated directly with the Biden administration, which both CPS and the CTU fully support. On Monday, Lightfoot told the *Chicago Tribune*, “We are talking to the Biden administration.” During the 2019 Chicago teachers strike, CTU President Jesse Sharkey, a former leading figure of the now-defunct International Socialist Organization (ISO), staged a promotional video for the Biden campaign.

The announcement of progress on negotiations came hours after multiple Biden administration officials publicly promoted school reopenings and asserted that schools can be reopened safely without teachers being vaccinated.

At a White House press conference Wednesday afternoon, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky told reporters, “There is increasing data to suggest that schools can safely reopen, and that safe reopening does not suggest that teachers need to be vaccinated.” She added, “Vaccinations of teachers is not a prerequisite for safely reopening schools.”

Jeff Zients, the head of Biden’s coronavirus taskforce, stated at the same press conference that Biden has been “very clear” that he wants schools to “reopen and to stay open.”

Also on Wednesday, Biden’s nominee for Education Secretary, Miguel Cardona, “breezed through his Senate confirmation hearing,” according to *Politico*. In his opening testimony, Cardona stressed as his first pledge, “We will work to reopen schools safely, so that students can return to

classrooms.”

For his pro-reopening statements, which included pledging to do “everything in our power to safely reopen schools,” Cardona received bipartisan support from all of the senators present. Senate Republicans are now pushing for a floor vote later this week on an amendment to the new relief bill that would tie federal funding for schools to those that resume in-person learning.

The drive to reopen schools in Chicago is part of a nationwide and international campaign. This homicidal policy is provoking massive resistance by educators, parents and students on every continent and has the potential to draw in wide layers of the working class in a broader struggle to contain the pandemic and save lives.

Beyond Chicago, educators across the US are demanding strike action to close schools, including in Washington D.C. and Keystone Oaks School District outside Pittsburgh. Democratic-led Washington D.C., headed by Mayor Muriel Bowser, filed an emergency motion for a temporary restraining order against the Washington Teachers Union (WTU), seeking an injunction to prevent teachers “from participating in a strike or other work stoppage” or even discussing it.

In Montclair, New Jersey, hundreds of educators have refused to return for in-person learning since January 25, prompting the Montclair Board of Education to file similar charges against the union on Wednesday.

In San Francisco, the city government is suing its own school district in an attempt to reopen schools. Democratic Mayor London Breed has been highly vocal against remote learning in recent weeks.

Strikes among educators are either happening or being planned throughout the world, including in Nigeria, Mexico, Canada, Brazil, Argentina, São Tomé, France, Cote d’Ivoire, Cameroon and other countries.

The critical task facing educators is to unite their struggles internationally and with all sections of the working class who have been devastated by the pandemic and face the same deadly working conditions. Only through the building of rank-and-file committees, independent of the pro-corporate unions and capitalist parties, will educators and all workers be able to unify on a global scale and put an end to the suffering and death demanded by the ruling elites globally.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact