Keeping Chicago schools closed during the pandemic is not negotiable!

Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
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!

Negotiations between Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) to reopen schools are coming to a head, and a tentative agreement is expected to be voted on this weekend.

At a Thursday morning press conference, Chicago's Democratic Mayor Lightfoot launched a vicious attack on teachers, stating emphatically, "We're still waiting, but not patiently, not anymore." She added, "Time's up, let's get a deal done."

The Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee insists that there is nothing to negotiate and that all schooling must remain remote only!

The Democratic political establishment and the corporate interests it serves want to send us and our students back into dangerous classrooms to protect the wealth of the financial aristocracy. There is no "common ground" to be found between us and Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot and, behind her, the Biden administration.

The determined opposition of Chicago educators to the city's orders to return to unsafe classrooms is the spearhead of a global rising tide of political opposition to exploitation and mass death. We educators who oppose this speak for the tens of millions of educators and workers across the US and globally who understand the dangers posed by a return to school buildings while the pandemic continues to rip through the population.

There is no hyperbole in stating that stopping the return to in-person learning before the pandemic is under control is a matter of life and death. Any position short of that is unacceptable.

The *Wall Street Journal* has declared that the current "standoff in Chicago" is the "first big test" of Biden's plan to reopen all K-8 schools in his first 100 days in office. We are drawing the line in the sand for all educators, but we cannot fight this battle alone. Our committee calls on parents, students, educators and workers across the country, in the auto and other manufacturing plants, public transit and logistics, health care, service industry and others to join our fight.

Official lying campaign

All the major corporate newspapers and broadcast television outlets in the US are issuing statements falsely claiming that schools are safe to reopen. Teachers are being slandered as ignorant, lazy and unduly fearful.

The facts are major studies published in *Nature* and *Science* demonstrate that closing schools is one of the two most effective means to stop community spread. A study published last month found that infections in children ages 10 to 19 preceded the increase in cases among adults age 30 to 49, indicating that children infect their parents—not the reverse.

Echoing politicians nationwide, CPS and many area districts repeat the lie that in-person learning is safe when the proper protocols are in place. CPS also claims they are able to have all these protocols in place, including mass testing, appropriate ventilation and vaccines for the workforce. None of these claims can be believed and the plans are wholly inadequate.

Behind the wave of propaganda are the interests of big business. Like Democratic and Republican leaders across the US, Mayor Lightfoot is demanding that schools reopen in the interests of the corporate elite, declaring Thursday that schools must reopen "to allow our parents to return to work." City government is concerned about providing childcare, not education.

CPS officials, including CEO Janice Jackson, admit that no one can keep the virus out of schools. The official lying campaign prepares school districts to insist that the inevitable outbreaks in schools didn't actually originate there, shifting the blame for their policy onto individual teachers and families.

The CTU's lethal compromises

The CTU is negotiating for the reopening of schools. While CTU may appear to be fighting for a "safe return," their agreement with CPS will endanger members, students, their families, and all of society.

Recent statements made by CTU leaders including "When we move, we move together," and "An injury to one is an injury to all," ring hollow.

CPS only agreed to even *discuss* reopening plans with the CTU once a large group of teachers (K-8) refused to return to buildings last week. The union did not organize action in August, when Wave 0 (school clerks and tech specialists) were required to return in-person. They were abandoned from the beginning.

The union did not organize any action when Wave 1 (pre-K and cluster teachers) were required to return on January 4. The CTU

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encouraged them to not go in as individuals and did not organize any collective action, leaving these educators vulnerable to lockouts and retaliation. The union has also offered to let teachers return voluntarily, representing a major health risk to those teachers and the community.

Many teachers who have refused to return have been locked out of their platforms, have had no access to their students and still have not been paid. Many of the classrooms had no students returning, yet CPS still demanded teachers be physically present in school buildings to teach remotely, as larger numbers of students are encouraged to return.

When our K-8 brothers and sisters refused to enter the buildings on January 25 and worked remotely all week, the board would not approve our telework hours. That is wage theft! CPS will dole out back pay later if it allows them to threaten and intimidate teachers into breaking rank now.

The CTU, and its parent union the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), as well as the National Education Association (NEA) and its locals, are the political and organizational instruments for the imposition of a lethal compromise of our lives and communities in the interests of a rapacious ruling class whose pandemic policy has already killed more than 462,236 Americans and over 2,284,000 people worldwide.

For a general strike to close schools and nonessential production and demand full compensation to all workers!

The Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is the political and organizational embodiment of the social and health interests of educators and the entire community. We are scientifically informed, politically educated teachers who understand that our fight is for everyone. Therefore, we are unmoved in our determination to keep learning remote until the pandemic is under control.

If Lori Lightfoot felt she could fire every single one of us, she would. When President Reagan used the full force of the state to attack the PATCO strikers in 1981, the unions kept the workers isolated and unable to defend themselves. This must not happen again!

There's nothing to negotiate. Reopening schools during the pandemic is not negotiable! Lives and health are not negotiable!

Our committee, as part of a network of rank-and file-safety committees formed across the US and globally, is preparing a general strike to shut schools and nonessential industries and demand full compensation for all workers and the resources needed to vaccinate the population, address the critical social needs of students and parents, and provide high-quality remote learning until the pandemic is under control.

We encourage all educators, students, parents, and all workers across Chicago, Illinois and northwest Indiana to join us, take up these demands and promote them in your school, neighborhood and workplace:

• **Immediately close all schools and all truly non-essential workplaces with no loss of income for workers!** The science is clear : closing schools and non-essential workplaces saves lives. They must remain closed until the threat to public health is over and rank-and-file safety committees, working in conjunction with trusted scientists and public health experts, can ensure the safety of children, teachers and all workers.

• **Full income protection for parents who choose to stay home!** Educators are not oblivious to the needs of parents, the corporate-controlled politicians are. Full income must be provided to those who cannot work because they choose to stay home with children. Unemployment benefits and additional forms of assistance must be increased to protect families, and a permanent moratorium put in place to stop all evictions and home foreclosures.

• **Free Rebekah Jones and defend all those who speak out against or refuse to work in unsafe conditions!** There is massive opposition everywhere, but many fear speaking up. Teachers know they will be targeted for discipline and abuse and they know the unions will do nothing to defend them. Florida whistleblower Rebekah Jones, the founder of The COVID Monitor, has been framed up and jailed for exposing outbreaks. All educators, students, and workers who reveal, speak out against or refuse to work under unsafe conditions—whether in schools, factories, warehouses, hospitals or offices—must be defended against any victimization by employers or state officials. Those who have been victimized must be rehired with back pay.

• **Fully fund high-quality online public education, including free high-speed Internet access for all!** The state of virtual learning is a disgrace. High quality public education for all is a social right! Computer hardware, software, broadband internet access, and adequate training and support must be provided to all teachers, students and parents for free. Class sizes must be reduced. Thousands of educators, staff and tech workers across the region must be hired to make this a reality.

• **Publish all existing information about the spread of COVID-19 in schools and workplaces in the most comprehensive and accessible form possible!** We now know that behind the scenes, Illinois and other states are carefully tracking COVID-19 outbreaks. But the information, when it is published at all, is only partially reported, part of a conscious attempt to conceal and downplay the danger. COVID-19 outbreaks are *never* limited to one school, one household or one workplace. The opposite is true: *all* outbreaks are connected in *one continuous process* of transmission. To protect ourselves and our families, we require a complete and precise picture of the spread of COVID-19 in and across all locations, easily accessible to everyone.

• **Hire and train nurses and expand hospital capacity to meet demand!** Patients must not be allowed to die in hallways awaiting treatment, and nurses and doctors must not be subjected to the psychological trauma. The resources hoarded by the rich must be used to hire and train medical professionals, build emergency facilities to meet medical needs and fully vaccinate the population.

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