

Chicago educators organize independent opposition to teacher union's plans to reopen schools

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The fight to prevent school reopenings in Chicago, which is the focal point of the class struggle in the United States, qualitatively deepened on Thursday evening. The Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee held a powerful meeting that gave voice to the most advanced and determined educators striving to close schools and contain the pandemic in Chicago and worldwide.

The committee meeting took place under conditions where the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot and Chicago Public Schools (CPS) officials are continuing their secret negotiations to try to reach a deadly compromise to reopen the schools. The resumption of in-person classes in the nation's third largest school district is key to the Biden's administration's plans to reopen all K-8 schools by mid-April so that the parents of school children can be sent back to work.

A central theme at the committee's discussion was that the only way to fight the pandemic is to expand the committee beyond CPS educators and turn to broader sections of the working class in the US and internationally. On the call were educators from throughout Illinois, Wisconsin, Georgia and other states, as well as workers from other industries, with many expressing anger over the ruling class' criminal handling of the pandemic.

A Chicago elementary school teacher stated, "My main concern and why I decided to participate in this meeting is that it's not like anything in this bargaining dance has led to sustainable change. I've had conversations about the 2019 strike. We did that dance for 11 days, but then not having any of our demands met. We're in that same situation now, but we're bargaining for our health and our lives."

There was broad agreement among committee members that the only way to halt the spread was by closing down schools and non-essential businesses. The same teacher added, "The union, I feel like they're saying the other side is not listening. If that's the case I would rather be on the picket line. I don't think anything will change unless there's any sort of broad action."

Teachers discussed the psychological toll that school openings are taking on themselves and their students, including fear of survivors' guilt in the event of the death of a classmate or teacher, as the corporate and political establishment attempts to normalize death.

In addition to reaffirming the perspective outlined in their

statement published Wednesday, the committee resolved to fight for the following demands:

- 1) Reject any deal that reopens schools during the pandemic. We are not negotiating over lives and health.
- 2) Demand negotiations be opened up and live-streamed. Educators and CPS families as well as the public health of the broader community are at stake.
- 3) Oppose any effort to rush through an agreement. Teachers need time to read what CPS & CTU propose, without threat of discipline or intimidation.
- 4) Broaden the committee membership to support these calls.

While the committee met, both the CPS and CTU continued to keep Chicago residents in the dark, releasing no details whatsoever about their negotiations to reopen schools, which are clearly coming to a head. A tentative agreement is expected to be announced soon, along with an effort to ram it through over the weekend and restart schools for tens of thousands of students and educators on Monday.

At a Thursday morning press conference, Chicago's Democratic Mayor Lightfoot launched a vicious attack on teachers, stating emphatically, "We are still waiting. But to be clear, not patiently, not anymore." She added, "Let's get a deal done. Enough is enough," and concluded her remarks by saying, "Today is the day, my patience is up."

Later on, Lightfoot bluntly stated the real purpose of the campaign to reopen schools, saying, "It is important for our city's recovery to safely reopen our schools... to allow our parents to return to work."

Lightfoot was followed by CPS CEO Janice Jackson, who reinforced her by falsely stating, "There is a mountain of data and studies that show with the proper protocols in place, schools are safe places to be." In fact, the vast bulk of scientific studies have proven that schools are major vectors for the spread of COVID-19.

Chicago's commissioner of public health, Dr. Allison Arwady, stated pointedly that "vaccination is not required for safe school reopening." In this, she was reiterating unscientific and politically-

motivated claims made Wednesday by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky, who stated, “Vaccinations of teachers is not a prerequisite for safely reopening schools.”

Behind the scenes, Biden is heavily involved in the fight to reopen schools in Chicago. The new Democratic administration, which dutifully serves Wall Street, is determined to suppress the resistance of Chicago educators and the broader working class in order to set an example and curtail future struggles of workers.

The situation is highly reminiscent of the pivotal 1981 strike by 13,000 Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) workers, which was isolated by the unions and brutally suppressed through mass firings by then-President Ronald Reagan. For now, Biden’s PATCO moment is being implemented through his surrogate Lightfoot, who is ruthlessly driving the campaign to reopen Chicago schools. While currently relying on the CTU to suppress opposition, the Democrats are holding in reserve more repressive measures, including punitive fines and the threat of mass firings if teachers defy their back-to-work order.

The ruling class is acutely aware of the significance of reopening schools in Chicago. If they are successful, this will pave the way for similar reopenings everywhere, enabling them to compel parents back to unsafe workplaces and ensuring the greatest possible flow of profits. If Chicago educators strike to prevent the deadly opening of schools, their militant action would quickly encourage similar walkouts across district and state lines and to other industries, creating the conditions for a general strike to close schools and nonessential workplaces everywhere.

The hostility to educators—who speak for far broader layers of workers everywhere who strive to contain the pandemic—was expressed in the most brutish manner Thursday by former New York City Mayor and billionaire Michael Bloomberg. In an interview with MSNBC, Bloomberg urged Biden to “stand up” to teachers and tell them to “suck it up” and return to schools.

The CTU is seeking to wear down the resistance of rank-and-file teachers, prevent a strike, and reach a rotten deal that will allow schools to reopen. Just as took place with the suppression of the PATCO strike 40 years ago, the CTU is doing everything it can to isolate its members and prevent any broader struggle of all workers against unsafe conditions.

According to *Second City Teachers*, at a CTU House of Delegates meeting Wednesday, CTU Vice President Stacy Davis Gates said “she can’t really call anything gained [during negotiations] a ‘win.’ Instead, she will call them ‘results.’” Following Gates, CTU President Jesse Sharkey “said there are difficulties in holding a strike now. The weather is a factor plus we would have a hard time in determining who is a scab if they work on-line. Also, some parents are threatening to sue the CTU.”

Following the internal union meeting, reports have emerged that some CTU delegates are using these talking points and telling members that a strike would be fruitless because right-wing parents’ groups might file lawsuits against the union.

One such parents’ organization, the Chicago Parents Collective, was formed in late January to demand that schools reopen. It is composed of upper middle-class entrepreneurs, small business people and academics. WBEZ reported that more than 100 of the

500 parents have students at just a single school in the affluent north side neighborhood of Lakeview.

The right-wing non-profit Liberty Justice Center has pledged to sue the CTU if there is a strike. The center’s Daniel Suhr, of Thiensville, a northern suburb of Milwaukee, told *Fox News* on Monday, “If the district says ‘This is what we expect of our employees’ and the union refuses to do it, that’s a strike and we will sue... We are ready to pull the trigger on behalf of parents.”

In the effort to serve the interests of big business, the Democratic leaders in Chicago and nationally are pursuing the same goal as the fascist elements the Trump administration mobilized in anti-lockdown protests throughout 2020, culminating in the coup attempt of January 6.

Rather than combat all these reactionary forces through the broadest unity of the working class, the CTU aims to intimidate its members to accept being sent back to unsafe schools.

Among Chicago educators and other workers, there is growing awareness of the connections between the pandemic and the promotion of far-right forces, as well as mounting opposition to the Democratic Party, which is now spearheading the reopening drive and the pursuit of “herd immunity.”

Over the past month, two irreconcilably opposed tendencies have developed. Teachers and the working class are fighting for science and the preservation of life. The capitalist class and all of its political representatives stand for mass death and the subordination of human life to corporate profit.

This situation is radicalizing tens of millions of workers and young people. To broaden their struggles as widely as possible, educators and all workers must form rank-and-file committees in every school, workplace and neighborhood, independently of the unions and the big business parties. These committees will be the center of opposition to the inevitable betrayals by the unions, and will fight for what workers need not what the pandemic profiteers claim they can afford.

The Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is part of a growing network of such committees across the US and internationally, which are reaching out to workers in every industry to prepare a nationwide political general strikes to close all schools and nonessential workplaces and guarantee full income to workers and small businesses. We urge educators, parents, students and all workers to join and help build these committees today.



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