

Chicago teachers poised to strike as mayor threatens another lockout

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The struggle by Chicago educators to prevent the reopening of schools in the third largest district in the US reached a critical turning point Friday. At present, the trajectory of the situation is heading towards a strike due to the intransigent opposition of rank-and-file teachers. This would have enormous implications, inspiring similar strikes across the US and joining a global upsurge of educators striking against school reopenings in over a dozen countries.

Negotiations between the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot and Chicago Public Schools (CPS) reached an impasse Friday, with CPS sending their “last, best, and final offer” to the CTU. Both sides are in basic agreement that schools should reopen, but the union is under enormous pressure from rank-and-file educators opposed to this homicidal policy.

On Friday evening, Lightfoot and Department of Health Commissioner Dr. Alison Arwady released a video shamelessly attempting to sow divisions between teachers, other CPS workers, and broad sections of the city’s population, falsely claiming that teachers want to be moved to the front of the line for vaccinations.

In the video, Lightfoot claimed, “One of the main issues we are stuck on is vaccinations. CTU wants to prioritize teachers over every other resident in our city.” Arwady followed Lightfoot to say, “The problem is we just don’t have enough vaccine.”

CTU’s demands for 20,000 vaccines, Lightfoot and Arwady argued, does not include all CPS workers and would take vaccine away from “the elderly, homeless, black and brown Chicago residents and other essential workers.” Lightfoot stated cynically, “All of you would have to take a back seat to teachers who have been working remotely for 11 months.”

In denouncing teachers for their limitless self-interest, Lightfoot referred to politically-motivated statements made by the new Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Dr. Rochelle Walensky, who on Wednesday said that schools can reopen safely prior to the full vaccination of staff.

The video closes out a week of full-court press demanding that teachers return to school buildings at a critically dangerous point in the pandemic, and falsely portraying them as lazy and selfish. Lightfoot herself has made several national media appearances this week, becoming the public face of the Biden administration’s central policy of reopening schools in order to get American workers back on the job to produce corporate profits.

In a Friday evening email to teachers, Lightfoot and CPS CEO Janice Jackson reprised threats to lock them out of their Google classroom accounts Monday if they do not show up to schools in-person. They demand that the CTU accept their proposal for a phased reopening beginning on Monday, February 8, stating, “Pre-K and cluster teachers and staff without an approved accommodation or pending ADA accommodation will be required to report to classrooms. ... [those] who fail to report will be deemed absent without leave (AWOL) and access to CPS systems will be terminated at the close of business Monday.”

In the city’s latest plan, pre-K and cluster students would return to schools on February 9, K-5 teachers and staff would return February 16 with K-5 students following February 22, and grades 6–8 teachers and staff would return February 22 with students following March 1.

This plan to return several thousand teachers, staff and students to buildings was made public on the same day the Lightfoot administration hypocritically warned Chicago residents not to gather in groups larger than 10 for Super Bowl Sunday. In fact, the city warned that gatherings of any kind increase the risk for spreading COVID-19.

Reports from a CTU meeting held Friday indicate that the union is also asking for a phased-in return to buildings, with pre-K through 8th grade teachers back in buildings by March 8 after having received a first dose of COVID-19 vaccine.

CTU President Jesse Sharkey said in a communication to teachers, “Three times in the past week, the mayor has drawn a line in the sand, and three times, our solidarity and our commitment has forced her and CPS leadership to step over that line. We remain remote until we land an

agreement, because what we're fighting for is right and necessary."

With a lockout anticipated on Monday, the CTU is continuing secret negotiations to return teachers to buildings, presenting unacceptable and unnecessary public health and safety risks. The CTU is under enormous pressure from rank-and-file educators, who overwhelmingly oppose reopening schools and already authorized a strike vote, compelling the union to also take steps to prepare a strike in the event that negotiations again break down.

It is vital that educators organize themselves in rank-and-file committees that they democratically control and that are answerable to workers, not the CTU bureaucracy. These committees must become the center of opposition to whatever miserable compromise the CTU inevitably reaches with CPS, either to avert a strike or to end one as quickly as possible.

The Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is fighting to establish rank-and-file committees in every school and neighborhood throughout the city. On Thursday afternoon, the committee issued the statement "Keeping Chicago schools closed during the pandemic is not negotiable!" At a powerful meeting Thursday evening, members resolved to reject any deal that reopens schools during the pandemic.

Regarding developments Friday, one CPS elementary teacher told the WSWS, "It is very disappointing the union is asking us to identify aspects of their bargaining we think are most important for reopening. We are being presented with a false dilemma. I don't think it's safe to reopen at all and I said so."

While CTU continues to claim that it is CPS that divided the workforce with a phased reopening, the fact is the union permitted that to happen, encouraging individual sickouts that left teachers open to retaliation. Only after teacher opposition could no longer be diffused in this way did the union even call a strike authorization vote—after two groups of teachers and staff had been returned to buildings.

The pressure from teachers on the CTU to oppose a return to buildings is enormous and growing. Parents too are overwhelmingly opposed to placing students in school buildings. Only 32 percent of all pre-K, cluster and K-8 students eligible to return to school buildings have stated plans to do so.

Earlier on Friday, the union organized a conference of Democratic aldermen and state legislators who have signed onto a letter asking Lightfoot to continue negotiating with CTU and forestall a citywide strike by teachers.

Lightfoot, with the Biden administration behind her, is a ruthless defender of the financial aristocracy and the interests of the major corporations. For now, the Democrats

are relying on the CTU to suppress teacher opposition and reach a reopening agreement. But the Democrats are holding more forceful measures in reserve for when teachers defy the back-to-work order, including fines and mass firings, and the increasingly vicious rhetoric from Lightfoot indicates that she is preparing to take such drastic measures.

As in Chicago, teacher opposition is applying immense pressure on union locals in other districts to posture as opponents of school reopenings even as negotiations continue. In response to the Philadelphia School District ordering 2,000 teachers to report to their classrooms on Monday, Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) President Jerry Jordan directed school staff to work remotely, stating, "There is absolutely no reason, other than sheer cruelty, to bring members into unsafe buildings Monday."

In recent weeks, an irreconcilable social opposition has developed. On one side, teachers, as part of the working class, are fighting for a science-based policy and the preservation of life and health. On the other, the capitalist class and its political representatives in both the Democratic and Republican parties ruthlessly subordinate human life to corporate profit, resulting in the needless deaths of more than 470,000 people in the US and over 2.3 million worldwide.

The fight by Chicago educators to contain the pandemic and save lives requires the broadest possible mobilization of the entire working class in a nationwide political general strike. There is not a moment to lose in expanding the network of rank-and-file committees that have been built across the US and globally to prepare for these coming struggles.



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