Chicago Teachers Union endorses a bargain with death, agrees to in-person classes

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Chicago Public Schools (CPS), Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot and the leadership of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) came to an agreement Sunday on a deadly plan to reopen schools in the third largest district in the US at the height of the pandemic.

After Lightfoot and CPS CEO Janice Jackson announced the tentative agreement (TA), the CTU held an all-membership meeting at which only top bureaucrats were allowed to speak in an effort to browbeat resistant educators and push through the sellout deal. The union is scheduled to hold a House of Delegates vote on the deal Monday. If approved, it would then send the TA to the full membership for a vote.

There is enormous opposition among rank-and-file educators to this bargain with death, which would resume in-person learning for tens of thousands of students and staff by March 8, with the first group returning February 11.

The Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is spearheading the fight to organize this opposition in order to defeat the sellout deal and orient educators towards uniting with workers in every industry to prepare for a nationwide general strike. In a statement published last Thursday, the committee warned that the CTU would reach a rotten deal and stressed, "There's nothing to negotiate. Reopening schools during the pandemic is not negotiable! Lives and health are not negotiable!"

What is unfolding in this city is the latest and among the most damning exposures of the unions and their pseudo-left supporters. The present leadership of the CTU emerged out of the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) and has controlled the union for the past decade. Based on a "social justice" platform centered on the promotion of identity politics and the subordination of educators to the Democratic Party, the CTU betrayed the powerful teachers strikes of 2012 and 2019, accepting school closures, mass layoffs and the expansion of charter schools. They are now the linchpin of the Biden administration's homicidal campaign to reopen the majority of K-8 schools across the US by the end of March.

In an editorial published February 4, the *British Medical Journal* accuses politicians worldwide of committing "social murder" due to their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout the world, the trade unions have collaborated with politicians of every stripe to impose the homicidal policies demanded by the ruling elites.

If successful in reopening schools, the supposedly radical leaders of the CTU will be implicated in the same policies of "social murder" as all the other union bureaucrats, including American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten, National Education Association (NEA) President Becky Pringle and those who run their state and local affiliates that have been facilitating school reopenings everywhere.

At the CTU all-membership meeting, the union heads issued a torrent of evasions and lies to try to intimidate members into accepting the deal. Underscoring the anti-democratic character of the CTU, the chat function was disabled during the meeting, and none of the over 10,000 rank-and-file members present were allowed to speak. Over 1,400 questions were submitted, with the CTU responding to roughly 250. The CTU leaders' efforts to ram through the TA revolve around three central lies.

Lie #1: The CTU's reopening plan is safe and scientific.

Over the past month, throughout its negotiations with CPS, which have been held in secret and without any input from rank-and-file members, the CTU has continuously claimed that it is advocating for a "safe reopening" of schools based on "science."

In a revealing comment at Sunday's meeting, CTU Vice President Stacy Davis Gates declared, "You know, we sat at a table with the clarity that number one, we shouldn't even be in a position of bargaining life and death. Like, how do you do that? And then when we agreed that we were not capable of bargaining life and death, we agreed that we were bargaining safety and guardrails, because that will be necessary in this moment. And then we were fought. They fought us every step of the way."

With these comments Gates admits more than she intended. Indeed, no one gave the CTU the mandate to bargain away the lives of teachers and their communities. From the beginning, educators, with the backing of the majority of parents, wanted to continue remote-only learning. The amorphous "guardrails" are the means through which the CTU defied the real mandate of teachers and imposed Lightfoot's demands.

After all their supposed "fighting," what do these "guardrails" amount to?

Under the terms of the agreement, Pre-K and special education cluster educators and students would return to classrooms this Thursday, February 11. They would be followed by Kindergarten-5th grade educators on February 22, whose students would return on March 1. Finally, 6th-8th grade educators would return on March 1, and their students would return on March 8.

Underscoring the complete recklessness of this timeline, scientists predict that the more infectious B.1.1.7 variant, first discovered in the UK, could become the dominant strain in the US by March. Under its plan, the CTU agreed to the herding of more than 70,000 students into confined classrooms across the city.

Dropping their original demand that the district would suspend in-person learning when the citywide test positivity rate surpasses three percent, the CTU now accepts a convoluted health metric whereby the

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district would only "pause in-person learning for 14 days" if the citywide test positivity rate increases for 7 consecutive days, with each day being at least 15 percent higher than the rate one week prior, and the seventh day ten percent or greater. All district schools would reopen after 14 days or when those same criteria are no longer met, whichever is later. Under this absurd and criminal scheme, as long as the test positivity rate increases slowly enough, it could reach 100 percent and the district would stay open!

Regarding vaccinations, the CTU bowed to the full-court press of the corporate media and political establishment, which seized on CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky's politically motivated statement last Wednesday that "Vaccinations of teachers is not a prerequisite for safely reopening schools." The TA mandates that only 1,500 educators be vaccinated each week, or six percent of the CTU's roughly 25,000 members, while ensuring that most educators will return to classrooms before receiving their required second dose of vaccine.

All other aspects of the deal, including accommodations, testing, ventilation, are equally unscientific. The entire premise that it is possible to safely reopen schools as the pandemic is raging out of control is patently false. If implemented, this reopening plan will allow the virus to spread among students, educators, parents and the wider community and contribute to a new wave of infections and deaths.

Lie #2: Chicago educators are isolated, and a strike would not make a difference.

At Sunday's meeting, CTU President Jesse Sharkey set the tone for this abject surrender by stating, "If we reject [the deal], we look down the other path. That looks like us being locked out and going on strike. … We should be clear there's risk down that path. It's a pandemic. It's cold. This wouldn't be an easy strike. This would be a strike in which the board would be calling people to work remotely. So, we need you to know people could cross a picket line by going home and logging on to their computer."

Seeking to bully teachers into submission, Sharkey warned, "We very likely might face legal repercussions. In which case, if the strike was declared illegal people could not make up the pay, and the board could levy fines against both individual teachers and the union."

Sharkey and the rest of the CTU leaders said nothing about the emerging struggles of educators across the US and internationally, as teachers strikes have erupted in over a dozen countries. Their only reference to events outside Chicago was to the upcoming Super Bowl game that night, which was referred to several times over the course of the meeting and used as an excuse to end the meeting early.

The reality is that by taking a stand against school reopenings, Chicago educators have created an enormous political crisis for the ruling elites in that city and across the US. They have inspired millions around the world who are similarly striving to protect lives over profits and put an end to the homicidal policies that have killed over 475,000 people in the US and over 2.3 million worldwide.

The CTU leadership is trying to shut down this struggle just when opposition is building everywhere. Refusing to return to their classrooms and following the lead of Chicago teachers, educators in Philadelphia are set to engage in a one-day strike Monday. There is mounting opposition everywhere to the ruthless reopening of schools—from San Francisco, to Los Angeles, Washington D.C., Boston and every other district slated to reopen in the coming weeks.

If Lightfoot were to attempt to punish teachers with massive fines and firings—for fighting to save their lives and the lives of their students—this would provoke anger throughout the whole working class, and conditions would quickly emerge for a general strike to defend the embattled educators. That is the last thing that the CTU and its parent union, the American Federation of Teachers, want because they are both aligned with the Biden administration.

Lie #3: The CTU has fought hard to reach this deal, which members should accept.

While the CTU postures as being "radical" and fighting tooth and nail for its members, its pro-corporate and pro-Democratic Party character has been on full display over the past month. At every step of the way, the union has gone along with the city's reopening plans, allowing Pre-K and cluster teachers to return to classrooms on January 4 without any collective action. Instead, it encouraged teachers to act individually, which resulted in over 100 being locked-out, which the union accepted.

The truth is that the CTU is acting as the enforcer for Lightfoot and the Biden administration, in order to set a precedent for the reopening of districts across the US. The only reason the union bureaucrats are giving in to the threats and intimidation of these Democratic Party officials is because they are in basic agreement with the demand that schools should reopen, in order to send parents back to unsafe workplaces producing corporate profits.

The real contempt of the union leaders for its members was on display in the Q&A panel at Sunday's meeting. In response to the question, "What does this do to make our pre-K and Cluster teachers whole again?" in reference to victimized teachers, the CTU moderator replied callously, "Doing nothing would get them their jobs back. If we want more, we will have to do more."

Rank-and-file educators in Chicago must reject the sellout that the CTU and the Lightfoot administration seek to impose on behalf of Biden! Preparations must be made to broaden this struggle to every section of the working class in Chicago and across the US!

The massive propaganda campaign launched in recent weeks will reach a fever pitch in the next 48 hours, with the corporate media presenting school reopenings in Chicago as a fait accompli and using it to batter down resistance everywhere.

Throughout this struggle, only the *World Socialist Web Site* has given voice to the real sentiments of educators and workers everywhere, who overwhelmingly support Chicago educators and strive to unite with their struggle. We will deepen this work and fight to connect educators in Chicago with their class brothers and sisters throughout the world, through the network of rank-and-file safety committees established among educators, autoworkers, logistics and transport workers, and more sections of workers internationally. The critical task is to build the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee as the voice of opposition, not answerable to the CTU bureaucracy, and unequivocally fighting to prevent the reopening of schools.

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