

Chicago Teachers Union delegates approve deal to reopen schools, as opposition among educators grows

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In an evening session on Monday, the Chicago Teachers Union's House of Delegates voted 85 to 13 percent in favor of a sellout deal to resume in-person instruction in school buildings, threatening untold numbers of teachers, students and parents with infection and death. The decision sends the deal to Chicago teachers for a membership vote, scheduled to last through midnight Tuesday.

The agreement, announced by the CTU Sunday evening, would reopen in-person classes for kindergarten and special education classes as early as Thursday, with staggered reopenings for different grades lasting through March 8. The phased reopening, designed to break the unity of teachers by dividing them by grade levels, means that schools will fully open for in-person classes just as the new, more dangerous strains of COVID-19 are expected to become the dominant form of the virus in the United States. This is will lead to new surges of infections and deaths as public schools become major vectors of transmission.

Teachers will have access only to a slow trickle of 1,500 vaccinations per week, meaning some teachers will not receive vaccinations until close to the end of the school year. For those who are ineligible for accommodations but do not want to risk infection by returning to classrooms, the deal "offers" them only unpaid leave. The agreement also includes no guarantees of back pay for teachers who have been denied pay for continuing to teach their classes remotely in defiance of the orders of the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) in early January.

That the union is even sending this deal to a vote exposes the sham of the supposed "democratic process" of the CTU. In negotiating this agreement, the union acted entirely outside of the mandate of the teachers, who want to continue with remote-only instruction to keep students and teachers safe. Instead, the CTU is imposing the mandate of the Democratic Party and the Lightfoot administration over and against the teachers.

The vote is also a devastating exposure of the pseudo-left forces, grouped around the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators faction, which have controlled and supported the CTU leadership for the last decade. For years, groups like the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) have held up the CTU as a model of "rank-and-file unionism" to be emulated around the country. However, they have discredited themselves as agents of the capitalist ruling class.

In a pathetic maneuver, the House of Delegates also voted in

favor of a "no-confidence" resolution in Mayor Lori Lightfoot and the leadership of Chicago Public Schools. This vote, which has no binding effect whatsoever, is meant to cover for the fact that the same body voted overwhelmingly to refer a deal to the membership that accepts virtually all of the city's demands.

The battle lines are becoming increasingly clear. On the one hand, the top priority of the Biden administration and the Democratic Party, with the support of the unions, is to reopen the schools as part of their rush to reopen the economy no matter the cost in human life. While Democrats are moving forward with school reopenings in other major cities such as New York (where the teachers' union announced a deal to return to classes on February 25), Washington DC, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Detroit, Philadelphia and others, Chicago is the tip of the spear of the offensive. Biden, the Democrats and the entire ruling class know full well that successful resistance by teachers in Chicago will encourage counter-offensives by teachers everywhere.

On the other side of the trenches, there is enormous opposition to the deal among teachers, who are determined to fight to continue remote learning to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. The Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which was set up last month, issued a statement, "Vote 'No' on the CTU-CPS plan to reopen Chicago schools! Saving lives is non-negotiable!" which denounced the deal as an "abject surrender that must be rejected."

This reopening plan, the committee said, "is a deliberate decision to place the lives of teachers, students and their families at risk. CTU President Jesse Sharkey and the entire leadership are functioning as accomplices in a policy of social murder. They have made this decision as the death toll in the US moves towards half a million, with more infectious and more lethal variants of the virus spreading rapidly throughout the country.

"The CTU leaders are not asking teachers to ratify a contract, they're asking teachers to sign their own death warrants. They have lost all credibility and forfeited any claim on the loyalty of teachers. This proposal should never have been negotiated, let alone presented to the membership for ratification."

Urging teachers to reject the deal, the committee said educators "should reach out to workers throughout the city, the region, the country and beyond to stand with us in solidarity and oppose any and all efforts by Lightfoot to use legal action to intimidate us."

Chicago teachers enjoy widespread support in the working class throughout the United States and around the world. Several teachers in Philadelphia, who took job action yesterday against their own district's move to reopen, contacted to the *World Socialist Web Site* to express their support. "Know that we are with you and are sharing widely with our family and friends. We support you and thank you for being leaders in the fight for safe schools!" said one.

The WWS has also received statements in support of Chicago teachers from around the country and from all over the world. "Foolish policies that unnecessarily endanger the lives of people, in this case school staff, students & their families, should be opposed," a worker from Finland wrote. "The pandemic is not under control, and schools are shown to show a role in spread of the virus through communities. Safety, backed with science, should bring before stubborn attempt to 'return to normalcy.' The school staff in Chicago have my full support."

The struggle by Chicago teachers is unfolding as part of an international movement of teachers against premature school reopenings. Yesterday, 180,000 Brazilian teachers in the city of São Paulo, the largest school district in the Western Hemisphere, began a strike against the partial resumption of in-person learning.

While the CTU leadership voted by a wide margin to approve the deal, there is enormous anxiety within the union bureaucracy, the Democratic Party and the American ruling class that they may be unable to force the contract through. A worried report yesterday morning in the *Chicago Sun-Times* described the response by teachers as "mixed," and one Chicago-area education reporter said that only one out of seven teachers she had spoken to supported the deal.

In an all-membership meeting Sunday night, CTU President Jesse Sharkey dredged up every specious reason he could as to why teachers should not strike, even citing the cold weather in one of coldest large cities in the United States. Sharkey also referred to the potential intervention against the strike by the courts, threatening that teachers could face fines and legal repercussions.

If there is such an intervention by the capitalist state against either a strike or teachers' refusal to return to classrooms, it is the responsibility of the entire working class in the city of Chicago to come to the defense of those who educate their children by preparing for a general strike to defeat the attacks on teachers. While there is immense support for a united struggle, this is precisely what the CTU wants to avoid. In passing on these threats it is functioning as the mouthpiece of the administration of Mayor Lori Lightfoot and the Biden administration.

Within the union, the media and the political establishment there is a "maximum pressure campaign" underway to bully teachers into accepting the deal. Initial media reports of the tentative agreement treated the deal virtually as a fait accompli, even though it has to be approved by the membership. Even before teachers or even the House of Delegates had the opportunity to vote on the deal, CPS has been treating the agreement as already ratified. On Monday, it began sending out emails to teachers who had requested health accommodations demanding that they reply within 48 hours to choose between remote learning or getting vaccinated.

In working with the CTU, the Democratic Party is pursuing a definite political strategy. While they, no less than Trump and the Republicans, are prepared to use the full repressive powers of the state to force schools to reopen, they prefer to utilize the services of the unions in an effort to strangle the opposition of teachers and enforce their demands with the bogus imprimatur of "collective bargaining."

This was spelled out explicitly in a profile of American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten published yesterday by the *New York Times*. In "The Union Leader Who Says She Can Get Teachers Back in Schools," the newspaper said Weingarten spends "15 hours per day on the phone with local labor leaders, mayors, the White House, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—trying to figure out how to reopen the three-quarters of school systems that remain fully or partially shuttered." In the days leading up to the Chicago deal, the newspaper said, the AFT leader was in constant contact with the mayor, school officials and CTU leaders.

Reopening schools is "something [Weingarten] thinks can be accomplished safely even before teachers are widely vaccinated, provided certain conditions are met, such as in-school virus testing," according to the *Times*. "Whether she can do so will be a major test of her own leadership, and of her ability to deliver a win for Mr. Biden, who has said open schools are critical both for children and the economy."

While the Biden administration, with the assistance of the AFT and CTU, wants to sacrifice teachers and students for corporate profit, educators in Chicago and across the country, like their counterparts in Brazil and around the world, are fighting for science and to save lives.

The Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is holding a meeting at 7pm CST Tuesday night, Feb. 9, to discuss the TA and mobilize opposition to the deadly reopening of schools. Register now and share this link with your coworkers to build the committee! All teachers, support staff and supporters should join the network of Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees.



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