

Educators fight to save lives in Chicago, São Paulo and worldwide

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Update 12:15 PM CST: The Chicago Teachers Union announced this morning that the tentative agreement with Chicago Public Schools has been ratified by a vote of 67 to 32 percent. Turnout was roughly 80 percent. The *World Socialist Web Site* will publish more details and analysis later this evening.

On Tuesday, Chicago educators voted on whether or not to accept the deadly deal to reopen schools struck between the leadership of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), Chicago Public Schools (CPS) officials and Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot. Voting ends at midnight, and the final vote count is expected to be released Wednesday morning.

The entire process for voting on the deal has been thoroughly undemocratic. After an all-membership meeting Sunday at which no rank-and-file teachers were able to speak and the chatroom was disabled, on Monday evening the CTU House of Delegates approved the deal with 85 percent voting in favor.

Teachers were given a little over 24 hours to vote on the deal, which the CTU sought to ram through as quickly as possible. There was no forum to discuss the agreement or raise objections, and there were reports Tuesday that some teachers received notifications that they voted when they actually had not.

There is enormous opposition to the deal among rank-and-file teachers, but the union's betrayal and efforts to intimidate teachers, combined with the unrelenting propaganda campaign by the corporate media and the entire political establishment, have placed enormous pressures on educators to accept the deal.

Regardless of the outcome of Tuesday's vote, the class struggle will intensify in Chicago, throughout the US and internationally, with educators at the forefront of the working class movement to contain the pandemic and save lives.

Since its founding in January, the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee has been the center of opposition to the CTU and the Democrats' conspiracy to reopen schools. At an important online meeting of the committee held Tuesday evening, members resolved to deepen their fight to prevent school reopenings and advance a scientifically grounded program to contain the pandemic.

Chicago teachers expressed their sense of betrayal by the CTU, stressing that the entire negotiations process was completely illegitimate, and the union never had any mandate to send teachers back into classrooms. Multiple speakers noted the way in which the CTU ran roughshod over members' democratic rights to push through the reopening plan. Instead of using the threat of a strike as a weapon against CPS and Lightfoot, they used it as a weapon against teachers, with the CTU President Sharkey saying little would be gained by striking and teachers could be subjected to massive fines.

Discussion then focused on the need to turn out to the broader working class, in Chicago, across the US and internationally, and to prepare for general strike action to close all schools and nonessential workplaces. Educators from Brazil who are on strike in São Paulo and Australian teachers took part in the online meeting and voiced support for the Chicago teachers, calling for a global struggle to save lives.

The entire premise that schools can be "safely" reopened—promoted by the CTU, the Democrats, and all the teacher unions in the US and their counterparts globally—is absurd. For decades prior to the pandemic, public education has been systematically defunded by the same hypocritical politicians now howling for schools to reopen in order to supposedly help children learn. School infrastructure and ventilation systems have been left to rot, and whatever pittance is provided by Biden's "relief" package will do nothing to resolve this crisis.

The timeline for reopening Chicago schools has Pre-K through 8th grade educators, staff and students back in school by March 8, with Pre-K and special education cluster classes starting this Thursday. Experts predict that by late March, the more infectious and deadlier B.1.1.7 variant of COVID-19, first discovered in the UK, will be the dominant strain across the US.

The deal endorsed by the CTU will leave educators, students, parents and the wider community at greater risk of infection and death. With students nowhere near able to receive vaccines, an untold number will become infected, with potentially catastrophic long-term consequences.

One of the central lies promoted by the CTU to pressure teachers into accepting their plan to reopen schools was that if they were to reject the deal and go on strike, they would be isolated and face the wrath of the state.

The real relationship of forces becomes clear when one examines the global context of the struggle in Chicago. The truth is that the struggle waged by Chicago educators is the spearhead of the class struggle in the US and part of a worldwide upsurge of teachers and other workers opposing the pandemic policies of "social murder" implemented by the ruling elites in dozens of countries. With over 2,350,000 deaths from COVID-19 worldwide, the ruling elites everywhere demand the reopening of schools in order to pressure parents back to work producing corporate profits.

Most immediately, the struggle in Chicago has directly fueled the resistance of educators across the country who have closely followed developments in Chicago and drawn inspiration from their determination. As Democrats press to reopen schools in Philadelphia, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Washington D.C., Detroit, Boston, Nashville and other major cities, all eyes have been on

Chicago as the voice of educators' opposition everywhere. In Philadelphia, thousands of educators engaged in a one-day protest against school reopenings Monday, directly inspired by Chicago educators.

The struggle in Chicago is also being closely followed by educators internationally, and a determined strike would embolden them to resist the global efforts to reopen schools. Over the past month strikes and demonstrations among educators and students have either broken out or are being planned throughout the world, including in Brazil, Canada, Mexico, France, Germany, South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, India, Myanmar, São Tomé, Cote d'Ivoire, Cameroon and other countries.

At present, the most significant workers struggle globally involves over 180,000 educators in São Paulo, Brazil, who on Monday began a powerful strike to oppose the reopening of schools in the second largest school district in the Americas. South America has suffered 432,265 deaths from COVID-19, with Brazil accounting for 233,588 of this total, the second highest figure for any country after the US.

A São Paulo educator commented on the parallels between their situation and that in Chicago, telling the WSWS, "The Chicago educators movement against the criminal reopening of schools is a turning point in the struggle of educators and workers internationally. We are facing the exact same issues in São Paulo, the largest city in Brazil. The government wants to push millions of teachers and students to enclosed classrooms at the worst moment of the pandemic, with record numbers of infections and new variants of the virus circulating in the country.

"There is gigantic opposition among educators, which the unions were unable to contain. We began a statewide strike this week. But the unions are already trying to isolate us, break our organization and open the way for a corrupt agreement. To be victorious we need to immediately form a rank-and-file committee and take this strike in our hands. I am sure that the first step of this committee will be to join forces with educators in Chicago and around the world, raising a force of the working class that cannot be stopped!"

Educators are entering into struggle against school reopenings throughout Brazil, including in Rio de Janeiro and Paraná, setting the stage for a direct confrontation with Brazil's fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro.

In neighboring Argentina, officials are pressing to reopen schools in Buenos Aires, the capital and largest district in the country, on February 17. The district is simply testing educators for COVID-19 before sending them back into unsafe classrooms.

In Quebec and Ontario, Canada, there are growing calls for strike action among educators, which the unions have resisted. Students are slated to return for in-person learning in Toronto by mid-February, setting a precedent for reopenings throughout the region.

Educators across Europe are also entering into the same struggle as the continent has suffered nearly 750,000 deaths from COVID-19. In France, thousands of middle and high school teachers struck at the end of January, holding marches in Paris and other main cities alongside school nurses and students.

In Bavaria, Germany, a student strike last week took place at seven schools in Nuremberg, spreading to Augsburg and gaining wide popularity on social media. The students are strongly opposed to the government's efforts to force graduating classes to return for in-person instruction as the pandemic has spiraled out of control since last November.

In South Africa, where 46,869 people have died from

COVID-19—almost half of the 96,350 deaths across the continent—officials plan to reopen schools on February 15. There is enormous opposition among educators to this homicidal policy, with the Facebook group "Parents Against the Opening of Schools" now having over 111,000 members since forming last May.

In Edo, Nigeria, teachers recently defied an official directive that they return to their classrooms on February 1, extending their strike indefinitely. Only last Friday, after striking for 19 days, did the leadership of the Edo State Council of the Nigeria Union of Teachers (NUT) quell the rebellion that was driven by rank-and-file educators.

In Ghana, teachers have been engaged in a nationwide strike for nearly a month, defying the National Labour Commission, which has declared the walkout illegal under Ghana's anti-strike laws. The Teachers and Educational Workers' Union has been meeting with the Fair Wages and Salaries Commission to try to settle the strike, but reports have not yet been published on the latest developments.

In Asia, which has suffered over 381,000 deaths from COVID-19, college teachers have been on strike in Punjab, India since January 25. In Myanmar, teachers are playing a significant role in the struggles against the imposition of a military dictatorship, with growing calls for a nationwide political general strike.

Amid this explosion of international struggles by educators, the critical task is to break free from the nationalist, reformist straitjacket of the trade unions and to build independent rank-and-file safety committees everywhere to unite all workers in a common global struggle. The CTU in Chicago is only one of hundreds of such pro-capitalist unions globally that seek to isolate their members and suppress the class struggle.

The fight against school reopenings is above all a political question over which class will decide how to respond to the pandemic. The ruling class all over the world has sacrificed millions of lives for corporate profit. Now the working class is responding internationally. The program required to contain the pandemic and save lives necessitates the expropriation of the vast wealth hoarded by the ruling classes of every country and the restructuring of society along socialist foundations.



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