

Lessons of the betrayal by the Chicago Teachers Union

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On Wednesday morning, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) announced that the tentative agreement it reached with Chicago Public Schools (CPS) was ratified by a vote of 13,681 (54 percent) members in favor and 6,585 (26 percent) against, with 5,092 (20 percent) not casting ballots. Pre-K and special education cluster teachers are now set to return to classrooms this Thursday, with waves of educators and students returning until all Pre-K through 8th grade educators and tens of thousands of their students are back in classrooms by March 8.

The timeline for school reopenings agreed to by the CTU coincides with the “hurricane” of infections and deaths that Dr. Michael Osterholm has warned is coming in the weeks ahead. The more infectious and lethal B.1.1.7 variant of COVID-19, first discovered in the UK, is forecast to be the dominant variant in the US by late March.

Underscoring the enormous dangers posed by the opening of schools, which have been proven to be major vectors for the spread of COVID-19, this week South African officials halted their vaccination program because the AstraZeneca vaccine has been found to be ineffective against the dominant variant in that country.

For the past two weeks, the reopening of Chicago schools was the most significant labor struggle in the United States. There was a concerted propaganda campaign involving the corporate media and the political establishment, falsely claiming that schools can safely reopen. Behind the scenes, the Biden administration and American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten were heavily involved in negotiations to reopen Chicago schools.

The aim is to set a precedent by restarting in-person classes in the third largest district in the country in order to reopen all other districts that are still remote only. This, in turn, is aimed at pressuring the maximum number of parents to return to dangerous workplaces to produce corporate profits.

The leaders of the CTU—above all, President Jesse Sharkey and Vice President Stacy Davis Gates—played the critical role in pressuring teachers to accept the deal they reached with Lightfoot and the CPS. They thus bear political responsibility for enforcing the policies of “social murder” pursued by both the Democratic and Republican parties on behalf of the American capitalist class. How many more educators, parents,

students and community members will die or suffer life-long debilitation as a result of the opening of schools will be the responsibility of the CTU.

In a press release Monday, the union wrote that the results put it “on a path to reopening school classrooms safely.” Knowing that this policy will lead to further infections and deaths throughout Chicago, Sharkey cynically wrote, “Thousands of students have lost at least one loved one to COVID. Those children—our students—deserve safety.”

What has unfolded in this city over the past month is the most damning exposure of the reactionary character of pseudo-left “social justice unionism.” Under the leadership of the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) faction, composed of members of the now-defunct International Socialist Organization (ISO), the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and other pseudo-left groups, the CTU has been the archetype for unions promoting middle-class identity politics as a cover for their betrayals for more than a decade.

They have spawned replicas that now lead the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA), the Oakland Education Association (OEA) and other pseudo-left-led local teachers unions across the US that have betrayed strikes and are now collaborating with Democratic officials to send educators and students back into deadly conditions. All of them are wholly subservient to the Democratic Party and the capitalist system.

Every aspect of the CTU negotiations and voting process was entirely anti-democratic. Since last fall, the union held over 80 secret negotiations sessions with CPS CEO Janice Jackson, Chicago’s Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot and other officials, accepting the basic framework that schools should reopen. Union members were kept in the dark as this conspiracy proceeded.

With rank-and-file members anticipating a potential lockout by Lightfoot on Monday, the CTU held a rushed all-membership meeting Sunday to present its agreement to reopen schools, during which the chatroom was closed and not a single rank-and-file teacher was allowed to speak. Sharkey read a laundry list of reasons not to strike, including, “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.”

Serving as enforcer for Lightfoot, and behind her Biden and Weingarten, Sharkey then used the threat of a strike as a weapon against teachers, saying little would be gained by striking and teachers could be subjected to massive fines.

According to reports from *Second City Teachers*, Sharkey repeated these same talking points at two private House of Delegates meetings held Sunday and Monday. At the latter meeting, 85 percent of these delegates, many of whom are closest to the CORE faction leading the CTU, voted to accept the deadly deal. Afterwards, they advanced the sophistry that they voted in favor of the deal only so the membership could “democratically decide,” while continuing to say this was the best offer teachers could expect.

Leading union officials who supported the reopening plan included CTU Area Vice President Sarah Chambers, who later posted on social media, “I voted YES based on my school’s support of the proposal. This agreement isn’t what we DESERVE but it is unlike any union/district agreement I’ve seen in the USA.” Chambers, a longtime co-chair of CORE, calls herself a “socialist” and is regularly interviewed in *Labor Notes* and *Jacobin*, the semi-official publication of the DSA.

After Monday’s meeting, rank-and-file teachers were given one day to vote on the deal and provided no forum to discuss the agreement or raise objections. There were reports Tuesday that some teachers received notifications that they voted when they actually had not, while over 5,000 were either not able to cast ballots or so disgusted by the whole process that they abstained.

There is enormous opposition to the deal among rank-and-file teachers. A Wednesday morning post on the CTU’s Facebook page announcing the results of the vote has generated over 300 comments, with the majority negative and many denouncing the union. One stated, “Absolutely a disgrace! Don’t ever talk to me about fighting for CTU again. The nerve to say it’s not a good plan then accept the plan ANYWAY!”

Educators in Chicago and everywhere must draw far-reaching conclusions from this experience. Chief among them is the need to break with the perspective of trade unionism and build new organizations of struggle, rank-and-file committees controlled democratically by workers themselves and not answerable to the corrupt union bureaucracies. Such committees must maintain independence from the Democratic and Republican parties, which serve the capitalists, and fight to unite with educators and all other workers across district, state and national boundaries.

The Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee has been formed to adhere to these principles and serve as the voice of opposition to the CTU. This committee fought for a “No” vote and appealed to the broader working class as its allies. It will deepen these efforts going forward and must be expanded into every school and neighborhood in Chicago and the surrounding metro region.

This committee is part of a network of such committees that have been built in New York City, Los Angeles, San Diego, Northern California, Michigan, Tennessee, Alabama, Texas and Pennsylvania, as well as in the UK, Germany, Australia, Sri Lanka and a growing number of cities and states worldwide. In each country, these committees are preparing for nationwide general strike action to close all schools and nonessential production in order to contain the pandemic, placing them in a direct confrontation with the unions and the capitalist parties that are enforcing reopenings of schools and all industries.

In a nervous Facebook post Wednesday morning, Sharkey wrote, “We are going to need our union. In the history of the working class movement it has always been the case that the ruling class has done shitty things to workers. Sent us into unsafe factories and mines, started unjust wars and sent us to fight in them, for starters. The mines were unsafe and yet members of the mine workers union still had to go in. This might be a reason for further organizing, but it is not a reason to abandon our union.”

In this distorted analogy, Sharkey says more than he intends. The determined miners’ struggles of the first three-quarters of the 20th century were long, bloody battles, many of them waged against the United Mine Workers bureaucracy, to protect the lives and safety of workers and to prevent needless workplace deaths due to the profit demands of the mine owners. Today, it is the CTU that plays the most decisive role in blocking the resistance of educators and herding them into classrooms, which, as Sharkey’s comment suggests, are as deadly as the coal mines.

This struggle is far from over. Chicago teachers will quickly be thrust into new struggles as infections and deaths spread across the city, and the CTU seeks to cover the situation up. At the same time, new battles are emerging in Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Detroit and other cities, which are part of a global wave of struggles, including the strike by more than 200,000 Brazilian teachers in São Paulo, the second largest school district in the Americas.

There is no progressive solution to the pandemic outside the mass mobilization of the working class in opposition to capitalism in the US and internationally. Educators and the entire working class must adopt the program of socialism, which entails the expropriation of the vast wealth hoarded by the financial oligarchy, the ending of the profit system based on exploitation, and the unification of workers internationally to reorganize society and implement scientific planning to provide for human needs.



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