As Chicago teachers begin return to classrooms, new arenas of struggle emerge

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On Thursday, about 3,200 pre-K and special education cluster students were expected to return to Chicago Public Schools (CPS) buildings, along with teachers and staff. An estimated 67,000 K-8 students and thousands of teachers and staff are scheduled to return to classrooms in stages between now and March 8.

The return to in-person learning is the result of an agreement between the Democratic administration of Mayor Lori Lightfoot, CPS CEO Janice Jackson and the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU).

The CTU announced the ratification of the agreement Wednesday morning, the result of a deeply undemocratic procedure. It passed with a vote of 13,681, or 54 percent, accepting the deal, while 6,585, or 26 percent, turned it down. More than 5,000, or 20 percent, did not cast a ballot. The agreement itself was the result of scores of secret negotiations taking place over a period of months, in which the lives and health of CPS staff were being "negotiated." Multiple problems were reported during the one-day window to vote.

On the same day Lightfoot returned students and teachers to school buildings, the more infectious B.1.351 variant of COVID-19, originally detected in South Africa, was found in Rock Island, Illinois, near the state border with Iowa. Twenty-three cases of the UK variant, B.1.1.7, have also been reported in the state, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Illinois Public Health Director Dr. Ngozi Ezike issued a statement, "We expected to see more cases of variants detected in Illinois, including the B.1.351 strain. These variants seem to spread more rapidly, which can lead to more cases of COVID-19 and even another surge."

Also on Thursday, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki reiterated the central domestic policy of the Biden administration, stating, "The president will not rest until all schools are open five days a week. That is our goal. That is what we want to achieve."

The agreement between CPS and CTU has set the bar for the Biden administration, which is working closely with the teachers unions, above all, American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten, as it reopens other districts in this most dangerous phase of the pandemic. *Chalkbeat* published comments from University of Las Vegas education policy Professor Brad Marianno on the deal. "This is the most comprehensive agreement for reopening schools that we have seen around the country. It's really setting a new standard for other districts."

Regardless of the cosmetic measures put in place by CPS and agreed to by the CTU, the reopening of schools will be a complete disaster. Schools will become major vectors for the spread of COVID-19 throughout the city and the surrounding metro regions, and explosive struggles will unfold as infections and deaths begin to mount.

As Biden seeks to implement this homicidal policy nationwide, struggles over school reopenings will spread across the country. Coinciding with the reopening of Chicago schools, on Thursday 2,000 teachers in Philadelphia defied orders to return for a fourth day this week.

Internationally, opposition to in-person learning is building everywhere. In São Paulo 60,000 educators went on strike Thursday against school reopening. They linked up their struggle with tens of thousands of their colleagues in the state network, who walked out earlier in the week, after city leaders ordered them to return to schools before students are set to return on February 15.

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The struggle is far from over in the Chicago Public Schools or the wider region. Reports from teachers indicate the first day back in weeks was chaotic, and individual schools have been left to figure out what the CPS-CTU agreement means and how to implement it.

One teacher told the WSWS that administrators in her school were asking teachers to explain certain aspects of the reopening agreement to them. In a Facebook post that was screenshot and went viral on other platforms, one teacher noted that there was no air purifier in sight in his classroom, but the box the device came in had been stuffed with a plastic bag for a makeshift trash receptacle.

Many teachers who did not get their accommodation requests approved described having to negotiate a process of applying for unpaid leaves of absence. Some are grappling with the decision to quit their jobs entirely rather than risk their own lives and health and those of their family.

Though the vast majority of CPS students will remain remote, CPS CEO Janice Jackson declared that no improvements would be made to remote learning in terms of class time, class size or technology, which she falsely stated are “as strong as it can get.”

All of this underscores that the sordid events of the last several weeks—the aggressive propaganda campaign against teachers, the lockouts and wage theft by the district, and the CTU’s insistence that the deal represented an advance and indeed the best teachers could get—were simply aimed at getting bodies back into the buildings, and have nothing to do with safety or educational outcomes.

Teachers and families in CPS and in districts across the US who are being forced back to in-person learning face serious dangers and will be pressed again to fight for life and health. The fight against school reopenings is a political question: Which class will decide how to respond to the pandemic?

There are two fundamentally opposed programs for addressing the pandemic: that of the capitalist class, whose profit-seeking has caused mass death from COVID-19; and that of the working class, whose fight for life and health demands the expropriation of the pandemic profiteers and the reinvestment of their trillions to provide for the social needs of the working class.

Just as in the vote of February 8, where the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee voiced the needs and interests of teachers fighting for the life and health of the region, the fight for a science-based pandemic policy in the schools in the next phase of the struggle in Chicago will be led by this committee as well. Join and help build the committee today!

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