

As fourth wave of infections arrives

Chicago Public Schools, teachers union prepare to reopen high schools

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The Chicago Educators Rank & File Safety Committee is hosting an online meeting this Tuesday, April 13 at 7 p.m. CDT: “Build Rank & File Safety Committees to Oppose Bipartisan Policy of Social Murder.” We encourage all area teachers, parents and students to join this meeting and share it with your friends and colleagues.

As COVID-19 cases rise in the Midwest, with the most alarming spike in Michigan, the seven-day average COVID-19 positivity rate in the city of Chicago has once again climbed to 5.4 percent. Genetic testing indicates the latest surge is being driven by the B.1.1.7 variant, which is estimated to be 50 percent more transmissible than the wild-type of the virus. As a result of the surge in cases, hospital admissions in the state of Illinois began to tick up last week.

On Thursday, Chicago Department of Public Health Commissioner Dr. Alison Arwady said, “We cannot be letting down our guard yet. At an individual level, it is high risk right now to be out and about and gathering in Chicago. Why are these cases on the rise? Honestly, they’re on the rise because people are feeling like we’re done with COVID and they are just staying home a lot less.”

This variant has been allowed to run rampant by state and municipal leaders’ decisions to reopen schools, bars, restaurants, and other businesses, as part of a nationwide effort spearheaded by the Biden administration. The primary source of outbreaks in Michigan, Illinois and other states have been K-12 schools, which were reopened with the critical assistance of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the National Education Association (NEA), and their state and local affiliates. A critical role has been

played by the pseudo-left Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), whose abject betrayal of its members in February paved the way for over a dozen other Democrat-led cities to reach similar deals with local teachers unions to reopen schools.

Since March 8, pre-K through 8th grade students have been encouraged to return to Chicago Public Schools (CPS) classrooms, but parents and students have overwhelmingly chosen to stay remote. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, fewer than a 24 percent of those students eligible to return have gone back to attend class in-person. Last month, the district extended the opt-in deadline for high school students in an attempt to encourage enrollment, but the response has been limited.

The reopening of the high schools, with students set to return on April 19, takes place amid an escalating political crisis for the Democratic Party in Chicago. In addition to the latest surge in COVID-19 infections among young people, an as-yet unnamed Chicago Police officer shot and killed 13-year old Adam Toledo, with the city stalling on releasing video of the incident. Additionally, the COVID-19 vaccine roll-out has been slow. Even in the neighborhoods with the highest rates of vaccination, only 36 percent of residents have had one shot and only 23 percent are fully vaccinated, according to city officials.

The COVID-19 infection rate in the Chicago schools is difficult to track accurately since testing is limited and the websites are not updated frequently. Where testing of students is taking place, it is voluntary and then only of symptomatic students. The CTU’s COVID-19 tracker reports 1,326 cases at 433 schools as of March 31.

With high school teachers set to return to buildings on Monday, the union announced a meeting of its delegates on Sunday evening, in an attempt to quell the enormous anger among teachers as more schools reopen at the most dangerous stage of the pandemic.

Prying open Chicago schools over the opposition of teachers and parents was a key first step for the Biden administration in the first weeks of the year and has been a major factor in the spread of the latest deadly phase of the pandemic. The February 8 agreement to reopen was lauded in the corporate media as a “comprehensive” agreement in which the union won key gains on safety, but this was belied by the tactics CPS and CTU used to push it through.

An aggressive national propaganda campaign was waged attacking teachers who opposed in-person learning. In the single mass meeting held by the CTU ahead of a one-day vote on the agreement, union leaders Jesse Sharkey and Stacy Davis Gates insisted both that nothing more could be won in negotiations, and that a strike would not necessarily secure any gains due to the likelihood of teachers “scabbing” by working remotely and the cold winter weather, among other miserable excuses.

After approving the agreement to return, the CTU’s house of delegates insisted that its approval of the contract was not an endorsement of it, but an “opportunity” for the rank and file to have its say in whether they wanted to go back to infected buildings, with the majority of teachers having been informed the union would refuse to mount a fight.

Since the agreement was approved, teachers were forced to return after their temporary accommodations were removed. Some remain on unpaid leave.

At present, the CTU is posturing as oppositional in the drive to reopen high schools. In an April 7 letter, Sharkey made clear that the union is simply proposing shifts in scheduling and requesting more toothless promises of safety. He wrote, “With COVID-19 infection rates again rising throughout the Chicago area, strict and practical safety protocols that prioritize preventing community spread are critical to reopening high schools safely for in-person learning. This is particularly vital given the current spread of the virus among younger residents.”

This is a transparent fraud, as the safety measures of the February 8 agreement were totally inadequate and

are not even being enforced, including the role of bogus labor-management “safety committees.”

More than 30 Chicago teachers remain on unpaid leave and face discipline for speaking to parents and community members about the dangers of in-person learning. The CTU has collected more than \$100,000 in a GoFundMe account for teachers who were locked out or otherwise victimized, but none have confirmed they’ve received any financial support from the union since the actions were taken some months ago. No serious discussion of safety can take place under such conditions.

CTU leaders pledged in February to cooperate with Lightfoot in reopening the high schools. On *Chicago Sun Times* reporter Fran Spielman’s podcast, Sharkey confirmed there would be no fight against school reopenings. He said, “it can’t repeat itself. That’s not an acceptable outcome. We have to be able to start with the things which we believe, and I hope and think we hold in common. Which is we want students in buildings. In-person is better in every way save one—there’s a pandemic right now. We should work together and figure out ways to make school safe as possible while still doing the things we need to do to help kids be safe and families be safe.”

In order to mount a fight to defend the basic rights to life and health, teachers must draw the lessons of their experiences in Chicago and across the country. The AFT and its “left” locals in the CTU and United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) have been critical props in the ruling class campaign to reopen the economy at the expense of workers’ lives and health.

The only organizations leading a fight politically to oppose this, demanding the complete closure of schools and nonessential workplaces, improvements to remote learning, social support for households and small businesses, and other essential demands, are the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees. We urge all Chicago educators, parents, students and other workers, to join the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee today at wsws.org/edsafety.



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