

Chicago Teachers Union holds remote work stunt action as COVID-19 cases continue to rise

Alexander Fangmann
14 April 2021

The Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee fights to unite educators, parents, students and the broader working class in order to close all schools and nonessential workplaces. We call on all Chicago educators, parents and students to join our committee today!

The leadership of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) called for high school educators to work remotely on Wednesday in order to pressure Chicago Public Schools (CPS) into finalizing an agreement on a reopening plan. Far from putting a stop to the dangerous reopening of high schools, the CTU is trying to position its demands as the means to convince reluctant parents, currently the majority, to send their children back to school buildings.

Although described in media reports as a “walkout” and by the union as a “job action” in response to the lack of an agreement, it would be more accurate to describe what occurred Wednesday as a complete stunt. Wednesdays are a district-wide remote schooling day, and most educators are not expected to be in school buildings anyway. In other words, the “action” was calculated to disrupt nothing. Even worse, those educators who might face the prospect of being disciplined by their principals know the CTU will hang them out to dry, as it did to Pre-K and special education teachers who refused to report to school buildings back in January.

CTU President Jesse Sharkey said negotiations between the union and the district were progressing but stuck on a “fairly limited set of issues.” Among items that still need to be addressed, according to the union, are accommodations for educators relating to medical issues and child care, allowing teachers who do not

have in-person students to teach remotely, creating a plan to vaccinate students 16 and older, and issues relating to high school schedules, such as how many days per week high school students at larger schools would be expected to attend in-person. While CTU has called for a one-week delay to the restart of in-person instruction due to a resurgence of COVID-19 throughout the city, there is no indication that this will hold up any agreement.

The CTU’s “action” comes at the point of a dangerous surge in the pandemic nationally as well as locally. The current rolling average positivity rate in Chicago is 5.8 percent, according to the Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH), a 12 percent increase over the previous week. Total average daily cases in the city have risen to 722, a 17 percent rise over the previous week.

Since March 1, test positivity rates and case numbers have exploded most substantially among children and youth. Children aged 0 to 17 have the highest positivity rate of all groups, at 8.2 percent, with 28,436 cases recorded. At the same time, the largest total number of cases in any age group—65,126—has been seen in those aged 18 to 29. According to the Illinois Department of Public Health, schools remain the single-largest source of potential exposures according to contact tracing data, at 21.5 percent of cases.

Case numbers recorded at CPS itself have continued to climb. According to district numbers, for the week of April 4, there were 58 positive cases recorded by CPS at 45 schools, and 400 people were sent to quarantine. This was a significant increase over the previous week, which saw 26 cases at 25 schools and 286 quarantined due to potential exposure. According to the CTU’s own

tracker, there have been 1,398 cumulative cases reported at 438 schools. Statewide school outbreak numbers continue to rise as well, with 20 schools recording outbreaks of more than five cases over the past 30 days.

Despite the increased rates of disease, Chicago high school teachers and other educators returned to work at school buildings on Monday without an agreement in place between CPS and the CTU. On March 16, district officials announced the return of high school students and educators to in-person learning for the beginning of the fourth quarter term on April 19.

In response to this announcement, Sharkey initially claimed, “We have no agreement on returning to in-person learning in high schools on any date, nor will there be an agreement until we know our school buildings can reopen safely.” However, it was almost immediately revealed that Sharkey himself was involved in crafting the district’s message to CPS families and educators, and had even proposed wording changes to the letter the district sent out.

The reality is that CTU is working closely with district officials as well as the administration of Chicago’s Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot to ensure the reopening of schools in order to secure for itself a continued seat at the table, especially in regard to the disposal of \$1.8 billion in federal stimulus money.

In an interview with WGN news, CTU Vice President Stacy Davis Gates conceded there are both private schools and public CPS schools “that are doing a good job” in regard to reopening. She explained that the union’s demands were aimed not at stopping in-person learning until COVID-19 transmission is stopped, but rather at putting in place measures that will make working class families feel confident in sending their children back to school.

As she put it, “Fall is the biggest challenge. The 70 percent of families who are still remote will see efficacy in the plan and say they’re coming back. Only 30 percent have opted in.” She continued on this theme, “Again, the biggest challenge we will face is not today. It will be in August bringing back 100 percent of our families. We have to prove to the 70 percent still remote that we can do this and keep their children safe.”

As Davis Gates’ statements make clear, the CTU is trying to make the case that its services are

indispensable to the Democratic Party in the present crisis. An agreement guaranteeing its “seat at the table” is the price for its role in keeping teachers from mounting an effective struggle. Teachers and other educators who seek to fight back against the ruling class policy of social murder should break from the unions and the Democratic Party and join the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee today.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact