

Chicago Public Schools, teachers union reopen high schools in spite of growth of deadly new COVID-19 variant

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On Sunday, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) announced that a tentative agreement with Chicago Public Schools (CPS) was ratified by union members by an 83 to 17 percent margin, paving the way for Chicago high schools to reopen for in-person classes today.

The reopening comes amid a resurgence of COVID-19 nationally and internationally, fueled by new variants, such as the B.1.1.7 variant, which is infecting young people at higher levels.

The current rolling average positivity rate in Chicago is 5.6 percent, according to the Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH). In February, when the CTU and CPS agreed to reopen classes up to the eighth grade, the rolling average positivity rate in Chicago was around 3.6 percent.

CPS's COVID-19 cases are climbing. According to district numbers, for the week of April 4, there were 58 positive cases recorded by CPS. Last week, there were 81 cases. According to the CTU's own tracker, there have been 1,416 cumulative cases at 440 schools, an increase from last week's 1,398 cases at 438 schools.

According to the deal, students at 37 high schools will be in class four days a week. At 53 schools, students will be split into cohorts that are in classrooms two days each week.

CPS also agreed to create a vaccination program for students aged 16 and older and to coordinate appointments for their families. CTU President Jesse Sharkey lauded this program, commenting in a press release, "The new vaccination program for CPS students and families is, we believe, the first of its kind in the nation to be negotiated by a union of educators."

However, there is no indication when this will happen. It will take weeks for high school students to become fully vaccinated, meaning there will be ample time for

many students and teachers to become infected.

Moreover, vaccines are not yet available for those aged 16 and younger. As such, the tens of thousands of students under the age of 16, many of whom have been in school since March, will continue to be in school as the new B.1.1.7 COVID-19 variant continues to spread. Studies have found children, like adults, can become COVID "long haulers," suffering from debilitating symptoms for months or years after contracting the disease. At least five hospitals in the US have gone so far as to create pediatric long-haul clinics to help children with lingering COVID-19 illnesses.

The deal was announced following a bogus stunt organized last Wednesday by the CTU, instructing teachers to work remotely only. However, the protest was timed to occur during a district-wide remote schooling day, reducing its effect to virtually nil. The CTU is led by the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators, a faction of the union bureaucracy with close ties to the Democratic Socialists of America.

In spite of the vote, a complete breakdown of which, including turnout, is not yet available, there is broad opposition to the reopenings and to the CTU. Rather, the vote comes from the well-established knowledge that the CTU will do nothing to organize a struggle and will instead ram through a rotten sellout over the objection of teachers, as it did when it agreed to reopen elementary and middle schools last February.

A teacher who voted "No" on the latest agreement recommended by the CTU leadership said, "The TA [tentative agreement] is a sellout. Just more of the same. Also they sent texts to push their 'just vote 'Yes' already' agenda. And from what I understand they offered high school teachers unpaid leave with benefits for the fourth quarter, but no one else. As if unpaid leave

is okay, which it's not, but it wasn't unilaterally offered.

"Now there are mumblings in middle school programs [all housed in K-8 buildings] about getting rid of the pod model and having the kids start switching instead of teachers. It's such a colossal irresponsible mess."

Another teacher condemned the union's complicity, stating, "I know it was too short of a 'fight,' but what can we expect from the union? They squashed every idea elementary teachers had about supporting high school teachers, including taking a 'no pay' day. The union had this attitude of 'we're not going to win this, we're just going to fight for some provisions' which already sets us up for failure." She added, "They made it tougher for teachers with [Americans with Disabilities Act] accommodations because that was ratified too, a bit. I would also like to add that it was extremely rushed, and their divide-and-conquer strategy of 'elementary school first and high school second' made it harder for high school teachers to have support."

"[The level of infections] speaks for itself," one teacher, a supporter of the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee said. "The CDC and the economy don't care. This is our new life. It's no longer a matter of 'what if I catch COVID-19,' but 'when will I catch it?'

"CDC says students can be three feet apart. But 95,000 CPS students [are supposed to return] tomorrow." She added, "Our school nurse died of COVID-19 a week ago."

"Last week I had to remain in a classroom and teach while three students who sat next to each other went home sick. I didn't receive any information as to whether or not these three kids tested positive for COVID-19."

In reopening high schools, the CTU bureaucracy, and above all its leaders, President Jesse Sharkey and Vice President Stacy Davis Gates, played a critical role in pressuring teachers to accept the deal they reached with Chicago Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot and CPS. They bear chief political responsibility for enforcing the policies of social murder pursued by both the Democratic and Republican parties on behalf of the American capitalist class.

Behind the backs of teachers, the CTU worked closely with CPS district officials and the Lightfoot administration to produce a rotten deal. Unlike in February, when CTU rammed through a deal to resume Pre-K to 8th grade students and educators, the union did not even bother to posture over the potential for strike action during this round of negotiations. Speaking to the CTU membership last Tuesday, Sharkey bluntly said,

"We want to be back in school."

The vote follows a decision last Thursday by the CTU House of Delegates to refer the tentative agreement for a vote to the rank-and-file membership. While claiming, much as it did in February, that this maneuver was to allow the "rank-and-file" to make a democratic decision, in reality its aim was to push responsibility for the reopening deal, negotiated behind the backs of teachers and against their will, onto the shoulders of teachers themselves.

The framework put in place this school year lays the groundwork for an ever greater push by the CTU, CPS and the Lightfoot administration for in-person learning in the fall. As Gates said, "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, "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."

Chicago educators must draw the necessary conclusions from this experience. The CTU has led the rank-and-file to betrayal after betrayal, with deadly consequences for students, educators, their families and communities.

The Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee was formed earlier this year by area teachers in order to organize opposition to the sellouts of the CTU and to demand the closure of all schools and nonessential workplaces. We call on all Chicago educators, parents and students to join the committee today!



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