

Chicago city administration rocked by crisis following school reopenings, ongoing police violence

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The Democratic Party administration of Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot is facing a deepening political crisis, with a wave of resignations and departures among her deputies and other city leaders, including the top three figures at Chicago Public Schools (CPS).

On Tuesday morning, a spokeswoman told reporters that Lightfoot would be granting one-on-one interviews “only to Black or Brown journalists.” This move is calculated to shore up support among the identity politics-obsessed upper-middle class constituency of the Democratic Party. By shifting focus to the identities of the journalists making inquiries, Lightfoot is transparently attempting to avoid answering questions about the many scandals besetting her administration, the recent wave of resignations and the release of thousands of leaked emails by city officials.

Lightfoot’s previous role under former mayor Rahm Emanuel was to improve the image of Chicago police following the murder of Laquan McDonald. During her tenure, however, police violence continues, illustrated in the recent murder of 13-year-old Adam Toledo. Social anger is growing.

But police murder is not the only crime the Lightfoot administration must answer for. The vicious campaign to reopen Chicago Public Schools in January and February, at a critically dangerous point in the pandemic, centrally featured Lightfoot and Chicago Public Schools CEO Janice Jackson in national and local media.

Lightfoot, backed by the Biden administration, threatened to “take action” if Chicago’s roughly 25,000 teachers and staff did not agree to return to buildings beginning in early February. In executing this plan, Lightfoot relied on the critical assistance of the Chicago Teachers Union in blocking a strike or other coordinated action.

Departures and resignations from city leadership

Earlier this month, Lightfoot announced her appointment of

John O’Malley as Deputy Mayor for Public Safety. O’Malley is a member of the Chicago Police Board and is a former high-level official with the US Marshal Service in Chicago. During his time on the Police Board, O’Malley sided with officers accused of misconduct, including those involved in the coverup of the murder of Laquan McDonald.

The last deputy mayor for public safety, Susan Lee, resigned after a failed bid to include social workers in the city’s emergency responses to mental health and domestic calls. This approach was criticized by city council members Ray Lopez and Maria Hadden in the summer months of 2020 amid the ongoing anti-police violence protests.

During that same period, Lightfoot awarded \$281.5 million in pandemic relief funding to the Chicago Police Department for payroll purposes. This amounted to 70 percent of the \$403 million in discretionary funding the city received from the federal government. It is about one-third of the city’s annual police payroll costs of about \$862 million.

Sydney Roberts, chief administrator of the Civilian Office of Police Accountability (COPA) resigned on May 5. Roberts was essentially pushed out by Lightfoot, who stated publicly that she was “extraordinarily unhappy with the way that they’ve (COPA) handled a number of things—not the least of which was taking over 18 months to move forward on an investigation regarding Anjanette Young.” Anjanette Young is a social worker who had her door broken down by Chicago police in a no-knock raid. Young was forced to stand naked in her living room as police ransacked her apartment.

Cook County State Attorney Kim Foxx’s deputy was forced out of the State’s Attorney’s office in the wake of the police murder of Adam Toledo in late March.

Other resignations and departures from city government include Lightfoot’s press secretary Jordan Troy, Lightfoot’s in-house labor negotiator Mike Frisch, Chief Risk Officer Tamika Puckett, Deputy Communications Director Lauren Huffman, Deputy Press Secretary Pat Mullane, Chief Engagement Officer Juan Carlos Linares, Chief Operating Officer Anne Sheahan and Chief Procurement Officer Shannon Andrews, according to the *Sun Times*. Chief of Staff Maurice Classen is also expected

to depart the city government. The Chicago Law Department's top attorney and personal friend of the mayor, Mark Flessner, resigned in late 2020 over the city's mishandling of Anjanette Young's case.

Some of the most significant of these many departures from city leadership this year are the three top CPS officials who have announced their exit from the district at the end of the school year: CEO Janice Jackson and her deputies, Chief Education Officer Latanya McDade and Chief Operating Officer Arne Rivera.

At the news conference announcing her departure, Jackson stated she was "both proud and humbled and also a little bit tired if I'm being honest." She said leading CPS "was and still is my dream job—but then you wake up." Jackson, who has been in the position for the past three-and-a-half years, having been appointed in 2017 by Rahm Emanuel, chose not to renew her contract with CPS.

Reports indicate that Jackson has accepted a fellowship at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. McDade would have been next in line for the CEO position in Chicago after Jackson's departure. She is instead to become superintendent of Prince William County Public Schools, the second-largest school district in Virginia.

Jackson's recent predecessors have all left under the cloud of scandal, including multi-million-dollar corruption schemes and rank mismanagement. Former mayor Rahm Emanuel appointed four CPS CEOs in his two terms in office. Jean Claude Brizard left immediately following the 2012 Chicago teachers' strike, just before the city began a brutal process of shuttering scores of public schools in 2012–2013. That initiative would be led by Emanuel's next appointee, Barbara Byrd Bennett. In 2015, she resigned and was later sentenced to more than seven years in federal prison for a \$20 million dollar bribery scheme involving vendors to the city. Following her departure, Forrest Claypool, an old hand in the Illinois Democratic Party, led the district, only to resign amid an ethics scandal. The district is still under federal oversight for its routine violation of the rules governing the treatment of special education students.

The Chicago Teachers Union issued a statement on the CPS departures underscoring the close working relationship between district and union officials. The statement offers the officials "the best in their future endeavors, and look[s] forward to a collegial and collaborative relationship with their successors as we continue our work toward creating the schools our students deserve." The CTU letter also blamed Lightfoot for Jackson's departure: "We are hopeful the mayor can improve on her ability to work collaboratively and cohesively with others, in particular her own staff and appointees in CPS."

While Lightfoot's leadership style is frequently cited, including her tendency to publicly criticize and blame subordinates, her vulgar and petty personal characteristics are not the essential matter in these departures. Jackson is not the only school superintendent to recently announce plans to leave

her position. Superintendents of New York City, Los Angeles, Houston and Broward County, Florida public schools are all also leaving their posts.

The CPS leaders who are departing carried out a vicious campaign, led by Lightfoot and the Biden administration, to force open Chicago schools in January and February, the first district in 2021 and the second in the US to reopen, during a particularly deadly phase of the pandemic.

What accountability will they face for the massive social crime in which they participated? They bear no small share of responsibility for the consequences of their district's policies: the illnesses, deaths, misery and stresses they created. None of these officials have made public statements accounting for their role and are instead fleeing the scene of the crime.

The city leaders, against enormous opposition from teachers, CPS parents and the wider community, forced the reopening of schools, victimizing teachers who spoke out about the dangers of in-person learning, forcing teachers onto unpaid leave and later clawing back unpaid leave agreements, and demanding all grades return to classrooms by mid-April. The district further pressured families to return to in-person learning by refusing to invest in improved remote learning after the vast majority of CPS students opted to continue to learn online.

None of this could have been accomplished without the collaboration of the CTU, which permitted Lightfoot and Jackson to divide the teaching workforce and isolate teachers from the rest of the working class. The CTU drove teachers back into buildings in "phases," in violation of the most basic principle of "an injury to one is an injury to all."

In a meeting on Superbowl Sunday, ahead of a one-day vote on the reopening agreement, CTU leaders told teachers they could not gain any more in bargaining, and that a strike would also not be successful, as teachers could scab by logging on from home. Thus, union leaders argued, there was no real choice other than to accept the agreement, which was promoted with a massive lie: that reopening schools could be done safely.

The reopening agreement between CPS and CTU was the most damning exposure of the reactionary character of pseudo-left "social justice unionism," pushed through by CTU's Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators 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.



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