

Chicago Public Schools prepares deadly reopening of schools with sanction of Chicago Teachers Union

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Chicago Public Schools (CPS) is preparing to send over 340,000 mostly unvaccinated students back into classrooms on August 30, in spite of the massive surge of the delta variant underway across both the country and the state of Illinois. The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) has endorsed the city's reopening and agrees in principle that teachers should go into the unsafe schools, although the city and the union have not yet reached a final agreement on the terms of reopening.

The current plan for in-person classes walks back a significant number of already-insufficient restrictions put in place when schools first reopened last spring. Social distancing recommendations are being reduced from six to three feet, even then to be observed only "when possible." Only unvaccinated students will be required to quarantine if they become exposed to someone who is infected, and there has been no indication from CPS of any criteria, either total cases, test positivity rates or other metrics, which would require the closure of schools.

At the time of this writing, the seven-day average of new reported infections in Cook County, which includes Chicago and its closest suburbs, is nearly 900 per day, a 25-fold increase from early July.

Earlier this week the city announced that it is re-instating an indoor mask mandate. While the limited measure is totally inadequate for combating the pandemic, it is a backhanded admission that conditions are rapidly worsening.

Despite this, the CTU is supporting the CPS reopening plans and says it hopes to form a "partnership" with the city for this purpose. In the past week the CTU has held press conferences to announce that they are in the process of negotiating with Chicago

Mayor Lori Lightfoot's office on a handful of supposed safety measures.

The union has said that regardless of the progress of negotiations, it will be sending its teachers into classrooms on August 30. On Wednesday, CTU President Jesse Sharkey held a press conference to give an update on the talks with the mayor. Sharkey attempted to posture as an opponent of an "unsafe" reopening versus a "safe" reopening, a scientific impossibility under the present conditions.

"If this winds up being a runaway surge, where people are getting sick, being hospitalized and dying," conditions which already exist, "we're going to take action," Sharkey said. "I think parents are going to support that and we're not going to simply sit there and participate in mass spreader events inside of our schools. We would take action before that happens, so we'll see."

Such empty threats will concern CPS and Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot not in the slightest, given that the CTU sabotaged the teachers' struggle against reopening in the spring semester, forcing through a deal which it had worked out behind their backs with the Lightfoot administration. Indeed, unlike in the spring, there is no indication that the CTU will even put any deal up to the pretense of a vote by the membership.

Later in a Twitter post that same day, the CTU admitted to the immense dangers presented by the Delta variant. "The challenge we face is that Delta is nearly as contagious as chicken pox but far more deadly and problematic from a public health perspective. In just the last week, the city saw an average of 400 new Covid cases, which was the metric last year to close schools."

Both the city and the CTU are well aware that opening the schools for in person learning will cause a major outbreak of COVID-19, regardless of whatever toothless measures are in place. But as opposed to previous strains of the coronavirus, however, children are especially vulnerable to the delta strain. Since April, 73 children aged 17 and under have died of COVID-19 nationwide, mostly during the summer months when schools were closed.

The impact of school reopenings is already being felt in southern states such as Florida and Mississippi, where schools traditionally open in mid August. More than 10,000 students in the school district serving the city of Tampa, Florida, are currently out on quarantine after only a single week of classes.

While CPS is requiring that teachers be fully vaccinated for the school year, students are not. Indeed, students under 12 years old are not even eligible for the COVID-19 vaccine and will not become eligible anytime soon.

Even among older students, however, the vaccination rate is dangerously low. As the CTU itself acknowledged in a separate tweet, only a small minority of eligible students have actually been vaccinated, including a mere 12 percent of black students.

This is a product not of racial, but of class oppression. Indeed, almost none of the poor and working-class areas of the city have a vaccination rate above 50 percent with several of these areas being well below 40 percent. These areas are where CPS draws its largest numbers of students and is where the Delta variant will be most devastating if it is allowed to spread to children in the schools, who will then take it home to their parents.

The insistence that schools open under these conditions is a conscious decision by both the city and the CTU to allow children to be infected and die so that Wall Street and the major corporations can continue to make profits.

The disastrous level of infections that will come with opening the schools must be opposed by teachers, parents, and students alike. To counter this, teachers must develop the network of rank-and-file safety committees which were founded in the spring, in opposition to the union-backed reopening plans taking place nationwide, into the center of a powerful

movement of the whole working class against both the government and the unions. We encourage all teachers to contact us today and help build the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Committee to protect their lives and those of their students and the population as a whole.



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