

Chicago teachers vote to reject return to in-person learning as COVID-19 cases surge

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On Tuesday night, Chicago teachers voted overwhelmingly not to return to in-person classes and to move all learning online in the third largest school district in the US. The action is part of a growing movement of educators throughout the country to demand the shutdown of schools as the COVID-19 pandemic surges out of control.

The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) announced late Tuesday night that the vote to stop the reopening of schools after winter break passed by 73 percent.

The CTU's House of Delegates voted to hold the membership-wide ballot earlier on Tuesday. The CTU structured the language, however, to allow the rapid reopening of schools. The vote calls for no in-person work until January 18 or until the city's COVID-19 infection rate falls below the threshold set by the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) last year, *whichever comes first*.

Illinois is experiencing record-breaking numbers of COVID-19 infections, fueled by the spread of the Omicron variant, including a growing number of child infections. On December 30, Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker advised hospitals to cancel non-emergency operations in order to free up space for a further increase in infections.

The Democratic Party, which controls Chicago politics, has pushed aggressively for the reopening of schools. Prior to the vote on Tuesday, Mayor Lori Lightfoot and Commissioner of Public Health Dr. Allison Arwady spoke to the media to threaten and berate teachers for considering action to save lives. Lightfoot declared that teachers should not be in a position to "shut down a whole school system, for what?"

On Tuesday night, following the vote, the CPS issued a statement announcing that classes would be cancelled

and that there will be no remote learning. The CPS CEO Pedro Martinez has declared that teachers who do not report to school will not be paid, essentially declaring a lockout.

Lightfoot, who led the charge on behalf of the Biden administration in January 2021 for the reopening of schools to in-person learning, waited until after the winter holidays last month, many weeks after the latest surge had begun, to declare that some businesses are encouraged to check patrons' vaccination cards beginning January 3, but no other restrictions will be implemented.

With utter cynicism, Martinez has cited the refusal of the city administration to put in place any restrictions on businesses as a rationale for keeping schools open as well. He told the *New York Times*, "If they shut down the restaurants, they shut down all the events, every component of the city and state, then hey, I'm not going to put my families at risk, I'm not going to force them to take their children to school. But short of that, what is the logic of thinking that somehow shutting down schools is going to help this pandemic?"

The Lightfoot administration, along with city governments and the Biden administration, is pushing the lie that schools are not a significant source of transmission. The Illinois Department of Public Health's data refutes this, showing that the overwhelming sources of COVID-19 infections, more than 44 percent, are schools.

In every way, the response of the city administration to the Omicron surge, as is the case throughout the country, has been catastrophic. Over the winter break, CPS distributed 150,000 take-home COVID-19 tests to students in neighborhoods where outbreaks had been identified, and families were instructed to drop off tests at the nearest FedEx dropbox. Images circulated on

social media of FedEx dropboxes that were buried in heaps of test envelopes. Media reported close to one-third of those tests had results that had to be invalidated.

Fewer than half, just 34 percent, of kids aged five to 11 in Chicago have received a first dose of the vaccine. In the days before Christmas, many parents searched for available vaccination appointments but could not find any.

Whatever their lying justifications, the campaign to reopen schools is dictated by one consideration and one consideration only: to return children to unsafe classrooms so their parents can continue to work in unsafe workplaces, churning out profits for the ruling class.

Chicago teachers have taken a courageous stand in defense of the lives and health of children, educators and the community as a whole. The Chicago Teachers Union, however, is working closely with the Lightfoot administration to try to smother opposition to in-person learning.

From the start of the pandemic, CTU and its parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers, has maintained the fiction that in-person learning could be made safe as the pandemic raged.

As opposition to reopening surged in early 2021, the CTU suppressed a powerful strike movement, telling teachers that there was no way to fight the reopening, that a strike would be too difficult, that teachers would scab on one another, and that Lightfoot's plans were to become reality.

In the summer, the AFT campaigned aggressively for the reopening of schools, with AFT President Randi Weingarten traveling the country as part of a "Back to School for All" tour.

The CTU has floated proposals that would keep schools open unless there is a high threshold of positivity among school staff. It has also proposed inadequate mitigation measures, like the provision of KN95 masks to teachers and staff and the return of a daily health questionnaire. All of these would be designed as palliatives to justify the reopening of schools.

At a public address on Thursday, CTU President Jesse Sharkey exuded complacency, declaring, "It's likely Omicon is gonna peak, a very high peak, and then decline just as rapidly. I think we're looking at a

short term, temporary pause to in-person instruction."

The action taken by Chicago teachers must become the starting point for a nationwide fight by educators, in alliance with parents, students and the entire working class, to shut down in-person learning as part of a broader strategy to eliminate the virus and save countless lives.

To enforce a change in policy, the *World Socialist Web Site* calls on Chicago teachers to join the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, founded last year against the reopening drive by the Democrats with the assistance of the CTU. The committee must link up the struggle of teachers in Chicago with that of teachers in New York City, Detroit and cities throughout the country, where committees have also been formed against the unsafe reopening of schools. These committees are guided not by what is good for big business, but what is necessary to save lives and prevent the lifelong debilitation of children.

The necessary measures to contain the pandemic—universal testing, contact tracing, isolation of infected patients, masking and vaccinations—must be implemented alongside a shutdown of schools and nonessential workplaces to cut off the chain of viral transmission and the allocation of full income to all workers affected.

Chicago teachers have taken a stand for lives over profit! It must be developed into a nationwide, and indeed international, struggle of the working class to end the pandemic once and for all!

For assistance in forming a rank-and-file committee, visit wsws.org/edsafety fill out the form below.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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