

Mobilize the working class behind Chicago teachers! Stop the pandemic!

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On Tuesday evening, 73 percent of Chicago teachers voted to stop in-person learning at Chicago Public Schools (CPS), the third largest school district in the United States. The overwhelming vote openly defies the Democratic Party at the local, state and federal levels, which has implemented a homicidal back-to-school campaign amid the surge of COVID-19 infections and hospitalizations due to the Omicron variant.

The bold initiative taken by rank-and-file educators in Chicago—who forced the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) to take the vote after the union allowed schools to reopen Monday—marks a major turning point in the class struggle in the US and globally. It has rightfully drawn support from workers worldwide, who are increasingly fighting to stop viral transmission and save lives as the third year of the pandemic begins.

This week has also seen a walkout by Starbucks workers in Buffalo, New York, over unsafe conditions. Over 1,000 graduate student instructors at the University of Michigan began the semester remotely in defiance of university President Mark Schlissel. In New York City, where the new Democratic Mayor Eric Adams has absurdly declared that schools are the “safest place for children,” a de facto sickout has taken place as over 300,000 parents kept their children home from school on Monday, with some schools reporting attendance as low as 15 percent.

According to the education tracker Burbio.com, 4,783 schools across the US have been forced to begin the semester remotely, including in Detroit, Atlanta, Cleveland, Newark and Milwaukee. Teachers in Oakland, California, are preparing a wildcat walkout this Friday to force the district to switch to remote learning. In Ontario, Canada, as well as other areas globally, schools have been forced to start the semester remotely due to the Omicron surge.

Responding to the vote in Chicago, the Democratic Party and the corporate media have ruthlessly gone on the offensive, seeking to pit working class parents against teachers. Chicago’s Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot and Chicago Public Schools CEO Pedro Martinez, both of whom

peddle identity politics to appear “left-wing,” have locked out Chicago teachers instead of switching to remote learning.

As took place at the start of 2021, the entire print and broadcast media are denouncing Chicago teachers. Multiple commentators have called for mass firings akin to the Reagan administration’s 1981 suppression of the strike by 13,000 members of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO), while the media howls in unison that Chicago teachers are “selfish” and “lazy.”

In an opinion piece in the *Washington Post* (owned by Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, net worth \$190 billion), Republican strategist Henry Olsen cynically branded the vote to implement remote learning as “an assault on the well-being of children.” He called on local, state and national Democrats to “act to bring vaccinated teachers back to work and prevent future unjustified work stoppages,” adding, “Lightfoot and the school district could go to court to force the union to return or pay substantial penalties for its act.”

The ruling class and all of its representatives have declared war on the working class, which is increasingly radicalized after two years of mass infections, suffering and death. With more than 850,000 Americans killed by COVID-19, and as the Omicron variant has pushed average official daily infections above 580,000 and hospitalizations once again above 115,000, the entire political establishment is openly letting the virus rip with catastrophic consequences.

In flagrant violation of all principles of public health, they now consciously seek to infect masses of children, their families and their communities. The policies being pursued have acquired an increasingly fascistic character. Substantial sections of the ruling class view the elderly and immunocompromised as a strain on social spending, with their deaths seen as a positive good.

Any claim that schools are safe is a bald-faced lie. Given that COVID-19 spreads through aerosols that can linger in the air for hours, overcrowded and poorly ventilated classrooms are hotbeds for infection. Wherever data on COVID-19 outbreaks is tracked, K-12 schools are

consistently the highest source of transmission.

The “herd immunity” and vaccine-only policies pursued by capitalist governments worldwide have allowed COVID-19 to spread and mutate, producing new and increasingly dangerous variants. Continuing this policy with Omicron, which is believed to be as infectious as measles, creates the conditions for the next variant to rapidly evolve with potentially even more dangerous characteristics.

The claims that Omicron is “mild” and will be the last variant, which have been used to justify the criminal policy of letting it spread unchecked, have quickly been exposed as lies. Hospitalizations in the US have now surpassed 115,000, the highest figure since January 2021, while countries across Europe are approaching or have broken record numbers of cases and hospitalizations.

Among the most alarming trends is the rapid growth of child hospitalizations across the US, the UK and other countries throughout the world. The rate of daily new child hospitalizations in the US is now more than double the peak reached during the recent Delta surge, during which more than 500 children died from COVID-19. Without a rapid change of policy, it is increasingly likely that over 1,000 children will die in the US during the Omicron wave.

The proper response of the international working class to the ruling elites’ global strategy of unending mass infections and deaths is to prepare a general walkout and refuse to work under unsafe conditions. The stand taken by Chicago teachers against the unsafe reopening of schools must become the rallying point for class-conscious workers around the world.

The industrial working class, which faces the same dangers of infection and death, must give full support to educators and coordinate a unified struggle to close all schools and nonessential workplaces. The most urgent necessity facing workers today is the need to build an independent movement consciously fighting for a Zero COVID strategy aimed at ending the pandemic once and for all.

The ruling class adamantly refuses to implement lockdowns or any other necessary public health measures because they impinge on its ability to accumulate profits. While US billionaires have amassed over \$2.1 trillion since the start of the pandemic, they advance the central lie that there is no money to fight the pandemic.

This naked class warfare must be responded to through broad-based collective action from workers in every industry and every country. The vast wealth of the pandemic profiteers must be impounded and distributed to the workers who produced this wealth, as necessary provisions during temporary lockdowns.

The broadest public health measures, learned by mankind

through centuries of struggle for social progress, must be fully funded in every country. In addition to temporary lockdowns, this includes mass testing, contact tracing, the isolation of infected patients, quarantining of exposed individuals, a globally coordinated program to rapidly vaccinate the world population, travel restrictions and more.

Since the start of the Omicron surge, a shift in consciousness has taken place in the working class and large sections of the middle class, including the most progressive layers among scientists, who increasingly understand that the policies of the White House and the entire political establishment are driven solely by the economic interests of the corporations and financial elite.

The necessary conclusions must be drawn from this experience. Financial interests cannot be the arbiters of life and death. Only a mass movement of the working class, supported by principled scientists and public health experts, is capable of implementing the strategy of global elimination.

The mechanism through which the policy of Zero COVID will be implemented is the building of a global network of rank-and-file committees, independent of the pro-capitalist unions and political parties, and fighting to unify workers across every industry and internationally.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), initiated by the International Committee of the Fourth International on May Day 2021, is the central nexus for these committees, which have been formed and are growing among educators, autoworkers, logistics workers, health care workers and other industries across the US and globally. All workers determined to put an end to the pandemic and save lives should complete the form below to join or build a committee at your workplace and prepare for the coming wave of mass struggles to save lives.



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