

# Chicago teachers' struggle part of growing class battle against deadly pandemic policy

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Working class resistance in the United States and around the world is escalating against the ruling class policy of allowing millions of workers and young people to become infected with COVID-19 in their schools, workplaces and communities.

Up to this point opposition has been centered in the schools where educators are fighting to stop in-person learning in overcrowded and poorly ventilated buildings, which have consistently been the source of the biggest outbreaks of COVID-19.

In Chicago, teachers in the nation's third largest school system are defying Democratic Party Mayor Lori Lightfoot's demands that they return to classrooms under conditions in which nearly one out of every four city residents is testing positive for COVID-19, with children aged 17 and under suffering the highest rates. Lightfoot, who has threatened to fine teachers for an "illegal strike," canceled classes for 330,000 students for the third straight day after teachers voted by 73 percent Tuesday night to start virtual-only instruction.

In San Francisco, California, teachers carried out wildcat strikes Thursday to demand the suspension of in-person classes, paid COVID-19 leave and N95 masks, after at least 600 teachers called in sick Tuesday. In a desperate move, which has no support, school officials have urged parents to get jobs as substitute "teachers."

Across the Bay in Oakland, teachers are planning to walk out today after 1,000 school employees and students tested positive. District officials have denounced teachers for carrying out an "illegal sickout" that is not sanctioned by the Oakland Education Association.

In Boston, school officials are scrambling to keep buildings open after 1,100 public school employees called in sick this week, in what is likely a combination of mass illness and the deliberate decision by educators to stay out. The same is true in San Antonio, Texas, where 1,000 staff members did not return from winter break, and in Hawaii, where 800 educators are out sick. In Philadelphia, 92 schools have been shifted to virtual learning after more than 1,100 teachers and nearly 2,000 of their household members reported positive cases since December 23.

Mass infections, the lack of teachers and widespread discontent have forced several other districts to temporarily shift to virtual instruction, including in Atlanta, Newark, Milwaukee, Cleveland, Detroit and across the border in Ontario, Canada.

A high school history teacher in New Haven, Connecticut

tweeted, "My school district is contacting teachers who have covid, not to see how they're feeling, and not even to contact trace. They're calling to tell them that their 5-day quarantine is up, and they should return to work. Folks who are sick and symptomatic are receiving these calls!"

In New York City, the nation's largest school district, parents are engaged in a de facto boycott of schools to protect their children, with at least a third of students being kept out of school buildings. Parents and educators are livid over the lie that "schools are the safest place for kids," which the city's new mayor, Democrat Eric Adams, has repeated ad nauseum.

In an interview with CNN, Mayor Adams was more honest, saying, "we have to open up to feed our financial eco-system." That is, reopening the schools to in-person learning is necessary to keep workers on the job producing profits, which is necessary to maintain the massive financial bubble on Wall Street.

Summing up the sentiments of educators, James, a teacher in Virginia, told the WSW, "Millions of workers' lives have been sacrificed to preserve a global status quo that does not serve the working class, including teachers, students and their families. We must demand to close our schools now. We are prepared to teach online, and we have proven our effectiveness at doing so. 'Business as usual' must be abandoned until the pandemic has ended, and COVID-19 rendered innocuous as a deadly disease."

At the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, more than 1,520 faculty, students and staff have signed a letter calling for a two-week delay in the resumption of in-person classes, because reopening after family gatherings during the holiday "is a recipe for a major COVID outbreak in the first week or two of classes." On Tuesday, graduate student workers—who struck for nine days in September 2020 to demand COVID-19 protections—voted by 95 percent to demand a pivot to virtual learning.

In Buffalo, New York, Starbucks workers walked out Wednesday and Thursday to oppose unsafe working conditions after more than 15,000 Erie County residents tested positive over the past week, a record since the beginning of the pandemic. The workers, who recently voted to unionize, are demanding the temporary closure of the store after about a third of the workforce was infected.

Thousands of flights were cancelled over the holidays because of widespread sickness and the refusal of exhausted and infected flight crews to work even though they were offered triple pay.

With one out of five US hospitals already at 95 percent capacity,

health care workers, who were fighting chronic understaffing before the pandemic, are being told to return to work without any quarantining at all, after a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guideline change.

The spread of infections in the meatpacking plants is just as bad or even worse than the first year, when meatpacking workers launched wildcat strikes in Iowa, South Dakota, Colorado and other states.

In the auto factories, COVID-19 is spreading out of control, and there is a growing sentiment for collective action against the danger of infection and the relentless overtime imposed on workers, particularly temporary part-time (TPT) employees, to fill in for their sick colleagues. In March 2020, a wave of wildcat strikes at auto plants in Michigan, Indiana and Ohio led to the closure of the North American auto industry.

A veteran worker at the Stellantis (Chrysler) Warren Truck Assembly Plant (WTAP) in suburban Detroit told the WSWS, “COVID is getting worse in the plants. It is just a matter of time before workers walk out, especially with the way they are pushing more and more hours on us. Last year, aside from COVID, they had the microchip shortage. It appears they have the chips now, and they are saying, ‘Screw safety, we’re going to push out as many trucks as possible.’”

“After the holiday, we were supposed to be on three eight-hour shifts. Now they are forcing TPTs to work 12 hours. I’ve never seen a 12-hour shift in more than 20 years at Chrysler. You have 1/2 of one shift staying on the line as another shift comes in, and everyone is being piled on top of each other. They’re doing this in the middle of a deadly pandemic, and the UAW is sitting with management and turning a blind eye to all this.”

TPTs are forced to pay union dues but have no rights or job security. Workers have begun circulating a petition opposing the 12-hour shift and demanding that they be treated with “decency and respect.” It declares, “WE ARE HUMAN BEINGS NOT MACHINES!”

“Workers want to shut down again,” a young WTAP worker stated. “There are a lot of workers off sick, and the company just mandated TPTs to work 12 hours a day. A lot of these workers are young parents and don’t have a sitter for their kids who are home from school. We can’t be working with the virus as bad as it is. But this time there is no aid, no extra unemployment, no stimulus. It’s like you’ll die from sickness or from poverty.”

Following the CDC’s decision to reduce quarantine time from 10 days to five—an action taken after lobbying by the airline industry—Walmart, the largest private employer in the US, with 1.6 million workers, reduced paid leave for infected or exposed workers from two weeks to one, in a move that is sure to be followed by other major employers.

Within the corporate and political establishment there is a united front against the growing resistance of the working class to the homicidal “herd immunity” policy.

The Biden administration, which has already allowed the Child Tax Credit to expire, cutting off the \$300 per child per month lifeline to 30 million families, is using the threat of destitution to beat back working class resistance.

Asked if there would be any further relief for workers impacted

by COVID-19, an unnamed “senior Biden administration official” told CNN, “No. There might be something small for restaurants. But the economy is booming, there are millions of open jobs, and we do not believe people should be sitting at home if they are vaccinated and boosted, as most adults are.” The official added, “So we are not going to write checks to incentivize people to sit at home...”

The response to the Chicago teachers’ struggle has been no less vicious. Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot—the embodiment of the identity politics of the Democratic Party—is threatening to fine teachers for protecting their lives and the lives of their students.

For his part, Trump responded to the courageous action of Chicago teachers by calling for the defunding of “failing government schools.” Arizona Republican Governor Doug Ducey just announced he would pay parents \$7,000 vouchers to take their children out of public schools even if they closed just for a day.

The fight for a rational and scientifically guided response to the pandemic is a class issue. The shutting down of schools and nonessential businesses, the provision of income to workers and small businesses affected by temporary closures and a massive public health campaign of universal testing, contact tracing, quarantining and global vaccinations can only be implemented through a mass movement of the working class guided by the principle that human life must take precedence over corporate profit.

The experience of the last two years is driving workers to draw these conclusions. “I had hoped there would be a change with how Biden would handle the pandemic,” a veteran Chrysler worker in Detroit said. “But he has the same policy as Trump. The government is leaving everything wide open even though the cases in the hospitals and the schools are going up. The CDC says whatever big business tells them to say.”

“The Republicans and Democrats are two sides of the same coin. They are both for the financial institutions, the banks and big business. They use race to keep us fighting against each other. But it’s not race, it’s the elites against the working class. That’s why they want to keep us divided. Those in control don’t care about sex or race, they care about economics. The 1 percent, the Bezos, they want to keep us fighting each other in the US and around the world. What the Chicago teachers are doing is right, and we should all join them.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* calls on educators, auto workers, service workers, health care workers and the entire working class to form rank-and-file safety committees to prepare and initiate actions to shut down schools and nonessential production, as part of a policy aimed at eliminating the virus that causes COVID-19 and ending the pandemic once and for all.

*For assistance in forming a rank-and-file committee, fill out the form below.*



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