

Lockout of Chicago teachers continues as child hospitalizations climb

Northwestern University infectious disease expert: “It is not safe to open the schools”

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The Chicago Public Schools (CPS) lockout of educators continued for the third day on Friday. Teachers remain defiant in their effort to prevent the pandemic from worsening, while the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) is continuing its negotiations with district officials to reopen for in-person learning as soon as an agreement can be reached, or by January 18, whichever comes first.

The city’s lockout of teachers has created a chaotic situation, angering many parents. Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot declared Friday evening that ongoing negotiations with the union “remain productive but must be concluded this weekend.” The district has announced that classes will again be canceled Monday, but that administrators are “dedicated to working day and night so we can get our students back to school next week, hopefully on Monday,” raising the possibility it will reopen schools with little notice at the start of next week should it reach a deal with the CTU.

On Friday, parents and educators told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the lockout is preventing teachers from reporting their COVID-19 test results to their online CPS accounts. Thus, those who test positive are presently unable to be approved for telework due to illness and would therefore be required to report in person if classes resumed Monday, a possibility which is prompting growing outrage among both teachers and parents.

The school district has attempted to lie, threaten and intimidate educators back into classrooms. Immediately after educators voted to teach remotely, city lawyers reportedly filed an unfair labor practices charge with the Illinois Educational Labor Relations Board in a bid to get the action declared illegal.

On Thursday, Chicago Public Schools published a Facebook post attempting to break up the ranks of teachers protesting in-person learning. The post claimed that 1 in 10 teachers showed up to work on January 5, and 1 in 8 on January 6. After protests by educators, the post was deleted.

Staffing levels in some schools are too low to allow the buildings to remain open. While teachers remained locked out of their school accounts and unable to conduct remote classes, CPS schools contacted parents Thursday night to announce that school buildings, which CPS had indicated would open at least in part, would be closed due to custodial and security staffing shortages.

Parents are angry at CPS’ refusal to offer remote instruction during the lockout and at having to make important decisions about their families’ health with little or no information. A mother of two

attending Inter-American Elementary, a school on the city’s North Side, spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site*. She said, “We shouldn’t be in this situation right now, but it is not the teachers’ fault. I wish we could stay remote. The kids should be getting instruction. We should be able to reach the teachers and they shouldn’t have locked them out.”

“My kids are different. One does very well with remote learning, the other one struggles more. It is not ideal, but something is better than nothing.”

“My son was exposed to COVID and is quarantined, but my other child is not. I can’t drop off one and not the other! One has gotten tested at school, but not the other and I don’t understand why not. There is no way to keep them away from each other, so I am keeping both at home. I am getting robocalls saying ‘Attendance is important,’ but I don’t think it’s safe to send them in. It’s possible the absences will be unexcused.”

There has been a vicious gang-up by Democratic and Republican officials in the national news media against the Chicago teachers, whose courageous refusal to return raises the possibility of a broader mobilization against the Biden administration’s mass infection policy.

Michael Bloomberg published an editorial on the Bloomberg news site titled “Children Cannot Afford Teacher Walkouts,” in which the billionaire media mogul essentially accused teachers of going AWOL. As if teachers were conscripts, he writes: “Chicago teachers’ decision to walk out on their students and refuse to return to the classroom Wednesday is a profoundly troubling abdication of duty that should be met with public outrage—and national opposition to its spread... We need to say loudly and clearly—as Democrats, Republicans and independents—that teachers are essential workers, we need them physically present in classrooms, and we will not stand for walkouts.”

In his opinion piece, Bloomberg also promoted his own \$750 million charter schools initiative. One might ask, how much of Bloomberg’s \$70 billion would it take to improve remote learning for school children?

Despite the efforts by the political establishment and corporate media to demonize teachers, the defiant struggle by Chicago educators has been met with broad support by workers and students, both in the city and internationally.

Nathan, a sophomore student at Dunbar High School in the city’s Bronzeville neighborhood, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “No, we should be doing the stuff here, be learning at home. Remote learning

isn't difficult. I don't want to catch COVID at all. Not at all. I don't want anyone in my family, my friends or in my community to catch COVID. It's not even a question."

On the return to school last fall, before the latest spike, he said, "It did feel like a new beginning, but then it [COVID] started spreading. It wasn't safe. No one was six feet apart. When you're in school, you're with your friends, you're busy, you're not thinking of COVID."

Far from being isolated, the move by Chicago teachers to force a shift to remote learning is part of a wider and growing movement by educators and workers to stop the spread of the pandemic. This week, teachers conducted mass sickouts in San Francisco and Oakland, California. Approximately 20 percent of the workforce in both cities was absent Friday, forcing the closure of 12 schools in Oakland.

Even as the negotiations to reopen schools continue and Chicago city leaders maintain an intransigent position, the pandemic situation is rapidly growing more dire, with child hospitalizations climbing significantly.

Illinois recorded 42,903 cases on Friday, just below the previous daily record set the day before. Just 9 percent of total intensive care unit beds remained available in Chicago as of Thursday, according to Illinois Department of Public Health data, or 63 for a city of nearly 3 million.

On Friday, the *Chicago Tribune* reported that area hospitals are increasingly "boarding" patients in emergency rooms due to lack of more suitable beds elsewhere in their facilities. Paramedics are also reporting wait times in emergency rooms of up to 15 hours, according to the *Tribune*.

In an interview with WGN News on Friday, Dr. Robert Murphy of Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine and Institute for Global Health gave a blunt assessment. Asked if "Chicago Public Schools are safe enough to open and have in-person learning?" Murphy, an infectious disease expert, replied:

It is not safe to open the schools. I'm sorry. It's very bad to do home learning. I mean, that doesn't work as good, everybody knows that. But look at what's happening. They can't even keep the schools open. They didn't have enough employees to work to keep the schools open. We were just interviewing that teacher. It just isn't safe now. Why can't they just say, okay, January is a write-off? Like, why don't you just stop going to school, work remotely for a month, until this thing starts to calm down, until we get over this holiday bump? Schools are not safe right now.

While Chicago Public Health Commissioner Allison Arwady claims hospitalizations of children "remain very rare," recent data from several children's hospitals in the area report a sharp increase, especially among younger children.

Lurie Children's Hospital, associated with Northwestern University, reported having 10 times more COVID-19 patients in the last two weeks than in late November. In those last two weeks, the hospital treated 110 children with COVID-19, most of whom were hospitalized specifically for infection with the virus. Only 20 to 25 percent of the hospitalized children tested positive for COVID-19 after having been admitted for something else.

Among the most alarming developments has been the rise in

hospitalizations among children under the age of five, who are currently ineligible to receive a vaccine. This population comprises around half the children hospitalized with COVID at Advocate Aurora, the largest health system in Illinois; over half at Lurie Children's Hospital; and a third of the hospitalizations at Comer Children's Hospital, affiliated with the University of Chicago.

At Advocate, about one quarter of children required intensive care, with Advocate physician Dr. Nekaiya Jacobs noting, "We're starting to see more and more patients of the pediatric age suffering from severe complications that are related to either their initial infection with COVID, or post-COVID syndromes."

As CPS and CTU work on a reopening plan, teachers must prepare to broaden their struggle. The main demands of the Chicago Teachers Union—that the district agree to a positivity metric for taking schools remote, the availability of KN95 masks for teachers and staff, and increased testing—are utterly inadequate for stopping mass infection, even if Chicago Public Schools could be relied upon to hold up its end of the bargain.

The *World Socialist Web Site* calls on Chicago teachers to join the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, founded one year ago to oppose the reopening drive by the Democrats that took place with the assistance of the CTU. The committee will provide the means to link up the struggle of teachers in Chicago with those in New York City, Detroit, Northern California, and cities across the US, as well as in other countries, where committees have been formed against the unsafe reopening of schools.

These organizations, formed independently of the unions, are guided by what is necessary for saving lives and preventing lifelong debilitation in children—not by what is good for big business, which throughout the pandemic has determined the policies of the Democrats and Republicans, as well as the American Federation of Teachers and other unions.

To contain the pandemic, a Zero COVID policy involving universal testing, contact tracing, isolation of infected patients, masking and vaccinations is urgently needed, alongside the temporary shutdown of schools and nonessential workplaces to break the chain of infection, with full income going to all affected. Such measures, however, will be brought about only through the development of a mass movement of the international working class, the overwhelming majority of the world's population, basing itself on science and fighting to place its needs over those of the financial aristocracy.



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