

Chicago teachers in forefront of nationwide fight to close schools as COVID-19 infections reach record levels

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More than 20,000 Chicago educators are entering their second week of struggle to demand virtual-only classes as teachers, parents and students across the country demand protection from the spread of COVID infections.

On Sunday night, school district officials announced that classes would be canceled on Monday for the fourth consecutive school day. After educators voted overwhelmingly last Tuesday to teach remotely until January 18, Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot locked educators out of their online work accounts, preventing them from conducting online classes with their students or communicating with parents.

The courageous stand by rank-and-file educators has prevented hundreds of thousands of Chicago students from contracting COVID in school as the pandemic rages. Chicago and Illinois are setting COVID case and hospital records and the Cook County Medical Examiner's Office last week announced officials have started deploying trailers to hospitals "to help decompress their morgues if necessary" as they treat the most COVID patients they've ever seen.

In a national television appearance on NBC's "Meet the Press" Lightfoot reiterated her claims that teachers were engaged in an "illegal strike," saying they had "abandoned their posts and they abandoned kids and their families." The mayor said her administration was "working diligently every single day at the bargaining table to narrow the differences and get a deal done" but ruled out any virtual-only classes. Lightfoot's own chief of staff extended the ability for the mayor's office staff to work from home for at least another week.

Addressing herself to the Chicago Teachers Union, Lightfoot said, "We need their cooperation and support and not have them on the sidelines, being critical, throwing bombs." An accusation of "throwing bombs"

from the mayor, a former federal prosecutor who has the closest ties to the Chicago Police Department, reveals a deep level of class hatred for the resistance by Chicago teachers. Her statement recalls the allegations made in 1886 by the city's industrialists and corporate media, used to railroad and hang the Haymarket martyrs, the left-wing leaders of the movement for the eight-hour day.

For its part, the Chicago Teachers Union is seeking to reach a deal to get educators back into classes as soon as possible. On Saturday, the CTU released a concessions offer, which included a district-wide COVID positivity metric that would take schools remote, KN95 masks for teachers and staff, expanded testing, and a return to in-person learning January 18. The union also requested an arbitrator.

A teacher tweeted her reply to Mayor Lightfoot's lying claim that the best and safest place for children is a classroom in the midst of the pandemic. "The best, safest place for my students right now is NOT my in-person classroom," she stated. "Because I have Covid. Which I caught in my classroom to begin with." Illinois teachers also responded enthusiastically to statements by students and teachers in Germany supporting their struggle. One said, "As a German teacher, I love this!"

The battle in Chicago is the high point of a nationwide struggle by educators, parents and students to halt in-person instruction that has thrust them into a direct political conflict with the Biden administration, which has abandoned any pretext of fighting to end the pandemic. Increasingly, actions are being taken independently of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA), which have fully backed the school openings.

Educators in San Francisco and Oakland, California, who began sickouts last week, are pressing to continue

and broaden their actions. Significantly, increasing numbers of working-class youth are joining the fight, well aware that the feigned concern for their academic and emotional needs, coming from politicians who have spent years cutting school budgets, is a pack of lies.

Over 250 students in the Oakland Unified School District have pledged to strike and stop going to school January 18 unless the school system shuts down classes and makes learning remote until schools can be safely reopened. “We are demanding OUSD to shift from in-person learning to online learning,” they write in a letter to the district superintendent.

The students started an online petition demanding the Oakland Unified School District shift from in-person learning to online learning, and for KN95 or N95 masks for every student, twice-weekly PCR tests for everyone on campus and more outdoor spaces to eat safely when it rains. The Oakland Educators Association, the local teachers union, has not even mentioned this fact nor supported the walkout of teachers that took place in the district last Friday.

High school students in New York City—the nation’s largest school district—are organizing a “Student Walkout for COVID Safety” on Tuesday, January 11, across all city public schools. The students organizing the walkout are “concerned and upset that there is no remote learning option, despite rapidly rising COVID cases”—the city’s COVID positivity rate remains above 30 percent—and are walking out “to keep students and teachers safe.” Hundreds of students have already signed a petition to go back to distance learning. Citywide, the attendance figures for last Friday were only 44 percent. Testing is inadequate and reported figures are one in five staff (27,697) and about 6 percent of students (70,241) having tested positive during this school year.

Seattle educators at Kimball Elementary are planning a sickout, shutting the school down on Monday, January 10 in protest. The school is facing pandemic-related staffing shortages so severe, some students were left unsupervised and teachers were having to work through their lunches and breaks with no end in sight.

In Michigan, more than 1,800 University of Michigan students and staff have signed a letter to the administration demanding learning be conducted online. It states: “What is critical is to act now and not wait until a last-minute decision is forced upon us by circumstances.”

With the backing of unions, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the nation’s second-largest school district, with 650,000 students, plans to reopen

schools for full in-person classes on Tuesday despite high transmission rates. As of Thursday, just over 50 percent of LAUSD staff and an estimated 30 percent of students have been tested prior to schools reopening, showing an alarming positivity rate of 13.5 percent, according to interim superintendent Megan Reilly. The present positivity rates among students and staff are 10 times higher than before the winter break, and results from the remaining students have yet to be reported.

The most conscious expression of the growing resistance has been the participation of hundreds of educators over the last week in emergency meetings of educators rank-and-file safety committees in New York City, Michigan and Illinois, Pennsylvania, the South and the West Coast. The meetings were forums for the most intense discussion on a strategy to close the schools and end the pandemic.

This includes the unity of educators, parents and youth with the broadest sections of the working class—health care, transit, logistics, manufacturing and others—to demand the closure of schools and non-essential businesses, and the allocation of the necessary financial resources to provide high-quality virtual learning, secure incomes of parents and small business owners affected by temporary shutdowns and carry out the necessary public health measures, including universal testing, contact tracing, quarantining and global vaccinations, to eliminate the deadly virus once and for all.

The *World Socialist Web Site* calls on Chicago teachers, parents and students to join the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, founded one year ago. We urge all others to join the national and international network of rank-and-file committees by contacting the WSWS.



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