

Chicago Teachers Union attempts to ram through agreement to reopen schools as Omicron surges

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Chicago teachers: Contact the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to continue the fight against in-person learning! Text 312-834-4773 or email chicagoeducatorscommittee@gmail.com. Read the statement of the CERFC opposing the reopening of schools to in-person learning.

On Monday night, the leadership of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) orchestrated a maneuver aimed at subverting the decision of teachers, which has the support of students and parents, to reject a return to in-person learning amidst the massive spread of the coronavirus pandemic.

The CTU pushed through a vote at a House of Delegates meeting to “suspend” the teachers’ remote work action and send educators back to schools on Tuesday, before a vote by the whole membership. Teachers are being instructed to prepare classrooms for a return of students on Wednesday, and a vote is being held simultaneously today on whether to approve the agreement.

The deal reached with Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot would send over 300,000 students back into overcrowded, poorly-ventilated classrooms, setting the stage for a massive surge of infections at the district’s 636 schools and in the city as a whole.

Rank-and-file teachers must reject this agreement, which is a complete capitulation to the Democratic Party’s program of mass infection through the full reopening of schools and workplaces. For the past week, the fight by Chicago teachers to stop in-person learning has been the focal point of the class struggle in the US, galvanizing opposition among educators, parents and students across the country and internationally.

CTU leaders had initially said the remote work action would last until January 18, and the union made this one of its main demands in light of the enormous increase in COVID-19 infections and hospitalizations. Another 208 Chicagoans were hospitalized with COVID-19 on Monday, more than any other day so far in the pandemic. The testing positivity rate now stands at 18.9 percent, and the seven-day average of daily new cases in Cook County is at a record 13,701.

Under these objective conditions, the CTU is attempting to send its members and students into unsafe buildings, knowing thousands will be infected and an untold number could become hospitalized, suffer long-term debilitation or even death.

The terms reached with CPS are wholly unscientific and predicated on accepting mass infections among students and staff. After posturing for months that it would reject any deal without a district-

wide health metric to trigger a transition to remote learning, the CTU caved to Lightfoot’s demand that only individual schools would close for five days if 30 percent (!) or more teachers are absent for two consecutive days due to testing positive for COVID-19 or are in quarantine from exposure. This will also happen [i.e., an individual school will go remote] if substitute teachers cannot bring the number to under 25 percent. Schools could also be closed if 40 percent of students are infected or in quarantine.

CTU also gave up on demands for widespread testing of students on an opt-out principle, with the district agreeing merely to test 10 percent of students at each school. These 10 percent would not even be tested every week. Rather, just a portion of them would be selected randomly.

The only other mitigation measure agreed to by CPS, which the CTU has touted as a “win,” is that the school district will provide a limited supply of KN95 masks to CPS workers and students, which will likely amount to no more than a couple of masks per person.

The CTU is not even fighting to restore pay for the four days that teachers were locked out by the Lightfoot administration, leaving them at the mercy of CPS CEO Pedro Martinez and the Board of Education as to whether to extend the school year to add in the days missed. Following the 2019 strike by Chicago teachers, Lightfoot similarly refused to extend the school year, resulting in four days of lost pay.

Shortly after the House of Delegates meeting, the CTU leadership held a press conference with local reporters. In his typical spineless manner, CTU President Jesse Sharkey opened the press conference by stating, “Just to begin, I’m personally exhausted and glad this is over. This has been a very unpleasant experience.”

After describing the CTU’s negotiations with the district since last summer, Sharkey said, “We realized that this pandemic could, you know if we’ve learned anything from it, it’s that there’s an amount of unexpected stuff, and that there’s kind of this constant threat as this virus mutates and we in school have to deal with all the threats that it represents.”

Sharkey went on to describe the lack of testing within the district, which he said caused unsafe conditions, without explaining why the CTU completely abandoned the demand for universal testing of students. He noted that a lack of testing “has real and very dangerous consequences. It meant that we were never really able to screen people or do a robust testing program, and so we wound up with dangerous outbreaks at a number of schools. We had an outbreak at Jensen School, for example, on the West Side, where two parents died. We

had an outbreak at the Carnegie School, where a staff member, a guy studying to become a special education teacher, JonL Bush, tragically passed away, etc.”

Asked by a reporter whether the CTU advocated for remote learning, CTU Vice President Stacy Davis Gates bluntly stated, “Not once did we advocate for remote learning.”

As he did last year, when the CTU carried out a similar betrayal of its members, Sharkey blamed the union’s sellout on the cold weather, stating, “The truth of the matter is that it’s cold out in Chicago, we’re locked out of our schools, we’re not getting paid.” He falsely presented the struggle of teachers as hopeless, saying, “We wound up with something at the end of the day that felt like as much as we could get right now.”

Asked whether the union would fight for CPS to restore pay for the days teachers were locked out of their online classrooms, Sharkey replied, “No one’s talking about being paid for going on strike.” He concluded, “We’re happy this is over, but we’re not happy that we had to go through it in the first place.”

Immediately after the CTU announced the results of the vote by the House of Delegates, there was a flood of opposition to the betrayal on Twitter and Facebook. The CTU’s live-streamed press conference, which has now been viewed over 25,000 times, has over 2,100 comments, with the overwhelming majority denouncing the agreement. A small sample include the following:

- CTU this is unacceptable! To send your members back without a vote is beyond wrong. Parents came out to support you and now you send teachers and students back with nothing in place? This isn’t leadership. I truly hope the rank and file members reject this proposal.

- Us parents support you all the time but you guys always let us down. Some of us really wanted REMOTE LEARNING. Yet no one ever cares about our children’s safety. SMH

- I thought there was mortal peril and that there were too many quarantined teachers to even staff the schools. What’s happened to change any of that?

- They did not let teachers vote tonight for a reason. They knew teachers would vote against the counter offer.

On Twitter, a CTU member stated, “I will be voting no on the proposed agreement and I am incredibly disappointed in the CTU. We have not won the safety increases they told us we were fighting for.”

Another wrote, “So my lost paycheck paid for... nothing. An insanely high metric for being able to go remote, being in person before the 18th, & testing/contact tracing that puts yet more work on teachers. Oh & 2 N95 masks. This is not something to be proud of.”

A parent in Chicago tweeted, “So the House of Delegates cares about the health and safety of the kids and the teachers, but just not that much, huh? In the end, when it’s put up or shut up, this is the result. As a #CPSparent, I am SORELY disappointed.”

The betrayal in Chicago took place only hours after the latest data from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) was released, showing a record number of child infections and hospitalizations across the US during the first week that schools began reopening after the winter break. A staggering 580,247 children were officially infected, while the rate at which children are being hospitalized due to the Omicron variant is more than triple the peak reached during the surge of the Delta variant, when over 500 children died from COVID-19.

The struggle of Chicago teachers to stop the spread of COVID-19 inspired walkouts last week by teachers in Oakland and San Francisco, California, while high school students in New York City,

Boston, Oakland and many other cities have circulated petitions calling for fully remote learning until the pandemic is contained.

A parent of a public-school student in Chicago told the WSWS on Monday: “I 100 percent support the Chicago teachers. The fact of the matter is that the investments CPS made before the start of the school year still fall short of what many of the schools need in order to safely protect students and staff. Furthermore, CPS is just outright lying to Chicago families about the cleanliness of schools as well as the transmission rates at schools. A study that conflicts with CPS showed that school has the highest rate of transmission compared to any other place for children.”

Doug, a retired teacher from the University of Washington in Seattle, sent a statement of support to the WSWS. Familiar with the betrayals of the so-called unions under the “labor-management partnership,” he voiced his encouragement at the formation of independent rank-and-file committees and the international solidarity he sees emerging. He said, “Thank you students and educators in Chicago and around the world, for standing up for yourselves and for all of us, really. You have tons more support out here than you probably realize. Stay strong and independent, and best of luck fighting the bosses and their partners in the union hierarchy.”

A Montgomery, Alabama, teacher told the WSWS on Monday: “I’m glad [Chicago and Oakland teachers] are taking a stand and that we are hearing about it down in the South. It hurts to hear people say that kids have to be in school no matter what, no matter if the person pouring out their time and education on them gets sick or dies or carries COVID home to their loved ones. It’s encouraging to hear about people standing up against the government and the school boards and refusing to be used this way, and I support them.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* calls on all Chicago teachers to reject the plan to reopen schools, which will only fuel the spread of the pandemic among students, teachers and the entire community. The betrayal of the CTU demonstrates that this fight can only be carried forward through the building of independent, rank-and-file safety committees in every school and workplace.

Chicago teachers can join the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to oppose the reopening drive. If you are not a Chicago teacher, contact the WSWS today to discuss building a rank-and-file committee in your school to carry forward the fight to end the pandemic.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact