

Opposition high among Chicago teachers as voting begins on CTU leaders' deal to reopen schools

Marcus Day
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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.

The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) was flooded with angry questions and comments by educators at an online membership meeting Tuesday night, during which union executives sought to present any further struggle against unsafe school reopenings as hopeless.

Voting began earlier in the day on a deal between the CTU and Chicago Public Schools (CPS) to restart in-person instruction for over 300,000 students in the midst of a still increasing surge of COVID-19 infections fueled by the highly infectious Omicron variant. In utter contempt for teachers' democratic will, the CTU agreed to allow classes to fully resume today, even though the vote will not conclude until later this afternoon. Some teachers reported on Facebook that they had still not received their ballots via email as of Tuesday evening.

The deal between CTU and CPS is an agreement deliberately designed to let the Omicron variant rip through schools without restraint. Children and teachers would be herded back into classrooms under conditions in which COVID-19 hospitalizations in Illinois hit yet another record on Tuesday, at 7,353, with more than half of those within Cook County, where Chicago is located. The trend follows the surge of hospitalizations nationally, which has exceeded its all-time record, topping 140,000 and pushing already overstretched health care systems past the brink.

Underscoring the degree to which the virus is spreading out of control in Chicago, Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot announced Tuesday that she herself had tested positive for COVID-19. Since last winter, Lightfoot has been a central figure in the Democratic Party's efforts to suppress opposition to the unsafe reopening of schools, in order to ensure that parents stay at work producing profits for the corporations.

The CTU is attempting to shut down the Chicago teachers' courageous struggle not because it is on the verge of defeat, as the union claims, but on the contrary, because it is receiving

growing support in the US and internationally, threatening to spark a far broader movement of the working class to close schools and nonessential workplaces in order to stop the spread of COVID-19. On Tuesday, thousands of students in New York City launched a "Walkout for COVID Safety," forcing the closure of at least 24 schools. In Chicago, students have begun to circulate a call for a similar walkout against unsafe conditions on Instagram.

The Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee issued a statement Tuesday calling on teachers "to reject this agreement and organize rank-and-file committees, independent of the CTU, to prepare a citywide walkout and demand the resources necessary to implement high quality virtual-only instruction to all of our students."

During the CTU's all-membership meeting on Tuesday, union executives openly admitted the wretched character of their deal with the city and acknowledged that teachers were widely opposed to it. Meanwhile, teachers demanded to know why they were being forced to return to school without having voted on the deal and denounced the total absence of any real improvements to safety.

"So we didn't get anything that we really wanted," one teacher wrote. "We didn't get opt-out testing. We didn't get remote learning for a two-week period. And she shot down the metrics CTU wanted. What big point did we get?"

Another said, "This is not at all what I was expecting or hoping for! I am so saddened and unfortunately I am still terrified to go to work."

A third commented that schools will never reach the metric triggering a shutdown "because students are not being tested!!!"

CTU President Jesse Sharkey began the meeting with his predictable spinelessness, profusely apologizing for having called Mayor Lori Lightfoot "stupid" in a recent press conference.

Turning to the broad opposition to the agreement, he stated, "I hear a lot of anger, and I hear a lot of frustration about the terms and that we were hoping for more. ... But, you know, I think that for us, the question is, given the conjuncture of

forces, and what we're able to keep by being out, we have to acknowledge that if we have stayed out, and as we got closer to the 18th or the authorization for our work action expired, the board was going to have less and less incentive to actually bargain with us."

In other words, the deliberate efforts of the CTU to limit the remote work action in advance to just two weeks was leading the struggle against unsafe reopenings into a dead end. At the same time, throughout the meeting Sharkey once again sought to offload responsibility from his own shoulders onto rank-and-file teachers, falsely insinuating that "morale" and willingness to stay out were fading.

CTU Vice President Stacy Davis Gates demagogically presented herself as frustrated and disappointed with the deal, before declaring, "I'm voting yes on this agreement, not because it has everything that I want in it, not because it has everything in the proposal that we put out to you on Saturday, but because it is something that is on paper that we can enforce."

However, union officials made clear throughout the meeting that the agreement with the city was not worth the paper it was written on, bluntly stating these facts:

- There would be no conditions under which the whole district would switch to remote learning. Individual schools would go virtual for just five days only if 30 percent or more of teachers were absent for two days due to being in quarantine or isolation. Even then, CPS could keep schools open if substitute teachers brought numbers down to 25 percent out, meaning the shift to remote learning would take place only when the schools were simply impossible to keep open.

- Widespread testing would not be implemented, with CPS agreeing to bring testing up to 10 percent of a school, on an "opt-in" basis.

- A limited number of KN95 masks would be distributed, with Sharkey admitting he was unsure when they would arrive. When a teacher asked about the quality of the masks, Sharkey acknowledged that the seal on the masks is inadequate and callously replied, "If you're really worried about it, get your own N95 mask."

Throughout the meeting, CTU executives repeatedly stated that Lightfoot will not budge on her refusal to implement any safety measures and that the union was compelled to "compromise." The union expressed in unvarnished form their complete subservience to the Democratic Party, with which they are intimately tied.

The Democrats' ruthless policy of death can only be responded to through the development of a mass movement of the working class, equally determined to fight for their safety and lives. Despite all the efforts of the Democratic and Republican parties and the corporate media to slander and demonize teachers and present schools as bastions of safety, the struggle by Chicago educators continues to garner widespread support among parents and workers and the basis for such a

mass movement is growing each day.

A parent of a child in CPS told the WSWs, "I don't think I can send my kids back this week. I'm in full support of the teachers and safety of all the teachers, staff and students. I work with people globally and have followed the pain of families. Students and teachers should not die or be sick and then have to teach history lessons of making the wrong decisions. Finances and politics are all that matter to politicians today."

The Biden administration has adopted in full the deadly and criminal "herd immunity" policies of the Trump administration. There are growing calls by politically connected scientists, such as Ezekiel Emanuel—brother of former Chicago "Mayor 1 Percent" Rahm Emanuel—to end not only serious public health measures but even reporting of COVID-19 cases and deaths.

The reopening of in-person schools, notwithstanding the cynical claims of media pundits, has absolutely nothing to do with the education and well-being of children, but everything to do with the stock market and the bottom lines of the corporations. Both the Dow Jones and S&P 500 jumped considerably Tuesday in the first day of trading after the deal between the CTU and CPS was announced.

In order to ensure profits continue to grow, the capitalist ruling class has shown it is willing to accept an unlimited number of infections and deaths. The trade unions, tied by a thousand threads to the Democratic Party and corporate management, have served as key enforcers of this strategy, covering up COVID-19 cases and deaths and ensuring workers stay on the job and children in classrooms in the midst of a raging pandemic.

Chicago educators must vote "No" and reject the death warrant the CTU is attempting to make them sign! There is no bargaining or compromise with a virus which is among the most infectious in human history.

To stop the pandemic and save lives, teachers have to take matters into their own hands and organize the struggle against unsafe school reopenings. This can only be accomplished through the building of new organizations of struggle, rank-and-file committees independent of the pro-corporate, pro-Democratic Party unions. The Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which is part of a global network of committees among educators, autoworkers and other industries, must be expanded at every school in Chicago and fight to unify the working class to stop the pandemic.



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