

From Paris to Chicago: The global fight to close schools and save lives

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Amid a record surge of COVID-19 infections and hospitalizations due to the rapid spread of the Omicron variant, a growing movement of the working class is developing internationally to stop the pandemic and save lives. Today, an estimated 75 percent of all primary school teachers across France are taking part in a nationwide strike that is expected to shut down half of all French schools.

On Wednesday, a record 3,145,916 people were officially infected with COVID-19 worldwide, including 814,494 in the United States, 363,719 in France, and 241,976 in India, with five other countries reporting more than 100,000 official new cases. Hospitalizations are surging worldwide, with more than 140,000 people now hospitalized for COVID-19 in the US, over 23,000 in France and nearly 20,000 in the United Kingdom.

Before the strike in France, last week 25,000 Chicago teachers took part in a powerful collective action to stop in-person learning, in defiance of the school reopening policies pursued by the Democratic Party at the local, state and national levels and supported by all the teachers unions.

On Monday, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) abruptly reached an agreement with Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot to reopen the city's schools. Facing widespread disgust among rank-and-file teachers, the union rammed the deal through by giving teachers only one day to vote, with only 44 percent of all CTU members voting in favor of the deal and 20 percent of members abstaining.

Inspired by the struggle of Chicago teachers, educators in San Francisco and Oakland, California, organized wildcat sickout strikes last week to stop in-person learning. Rank-and-file committees, built independently of the unions by educators across the

US—including in New York City, Michigan, Pennsylvania, throughout the South and along the West Coast—have organized widely-attended online meetings over the past two weeks and are expanding in each region of the country.

Throughout this week, high school students in New York City, Chicago, Boston, Oakland, Portland, and other US cities have circulated petitions calling for a remote learning option, garnering thousands of signatures. On Tuesday, nearly 1,000 students at over 30 K-12 schools in New York City walked out of class calling to demand a switch to remote learning, and similar demonstrations are planned in Chicago and Oakland in the coming days. According to a poll conducted last weekend, the majority of US adults support remote learning, including 63 percent of those with an income less than \$50,000.

In the United Kingdom, where COVID-19 infections and hospitalization among children have reached record levels, educators and parents are deepening their struggle to stop unsafe school reopenings. The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (UK) held a widely attended meeting Tuesday, which presented a plan of action to force the switch to fully remote learning.

In a video posted Wednesday, British parent Lisa Diaz, who has led a series of school strikes since October, voiced her support for Chicago teachers, declaring, “You’re making a stand, not just for yourselves, but for the children.” She concluded, “I just want to send all my solidarity from the UK and say thank you for taking a stand. And whilst I’m here, well done to all the teachers from France who are doing the same, and the kids in the US who are walking out.”

In Hidalgo and Baja, Mexico, strikes have begun involving tens of thousands of teachers. While the

primary focus is on contract issues related to pay, these strikes coincide with the forced reopening of schools amid skyrocketing COVID-19 infections.

The growing international struggle of educators and youth against school reopenings comes in response to the global implementation of this deadly policy by world governments on behalf of the corporate and financial elite.

Throughout the world and, in particular, in the United States and across Europe, capitalist governments have responded to the emergence of the Omicron variant by dropping all pretense that they aim to stop the pandemic. All talk of “mitigations” and “ending the pandemic” has disappeared. Instead, they now openly support the “herd immunity” strategy formerly pursued by only the most right-wing governments. They are determined to allow the uncontrolled spread of the virus, based on the unscientific belief that it will quickly run out of hosts and become endemic.

In the US, the Biden administration and its representatives ever more explicitly state they intend to allow the entire population to become infected. On Tuesday, the Center for Strategic and International Studies—one of the leading think tanks of American imperialism—posted a “Fireside Chat with Dr. Anthony Fauci.” In the interview, Biden’s chief medical adviser declared with callous indifference that Omicron “will, ultimately, find just about everybody.”

Regarding vaccinated people, Fauci stated, “Some, maybe a lot of them, will get infected” and will “do reasonably well.” Fauci added, “those who are still unvaccinated are going to get the brunt of the severe aspect of this,” and some fraction “are going to get seriously ill and are going to die.” Fauci lamented only the fact that this “will challenge our health system.”

The reopening of schools is central to the “herd immunity” strategy for two reasons. First, returning students to class is necessary to force parents back to work. Second, overcrowded and poorly ventilated school buildings are hotbeds of viral transmission, enabling COVID-19 to spread as rapidly as possible and quickly infect students, educators, their families and their communities.

What sparked today’s strike by French teachers were efforts by the Macron government to quietly change reopening guidelines in such a manner as to keep schools open as COVID-19 cases explode. Within one

week, these protocols were clearly disastrous, prompting rank-and-file teachers to demand strike action.

In Chicago, the CTU is now enforcing a policy whereby individual schools will only close if more than 30 percent of staff or 40 percent of children are either infected with COVID-19 or in quarantine due to exposure. In other words, their deal is predicated on accepting mass infections in schools and communities.

The fight against “herd immunity” is a common global struggle that is increasingly being taken up by the international working class, in direct opposition to the capitalist system. By its very nature, the pandemic cannot be fought on a national basis or through appeals to the powers that be. COVID-19 will be eliminated only through a globally coordinated mass movement to impose temporary lockdowns, shut down schools and nonessential production and deploy all available public health measures.

One of the great challenges confronting workers in every country is to not see their struggles as isolated incidents but rather as part of a global process. To generalize their experiences and coordinate their struggles globally, workers require new forms of organization, rank-and-file committees, that are democratically run and answerable to the workers themselves.

Numerous such committees have been established among educators, autoworkers, health care workers, logistics workers, and other sections of the working class, which are now united under the aegis of the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). This network of committees must forge ever closer links and actively fight to unify and lead the growing movement of the working class to stop the pandemic and save lives.

Those who wish to become seriously involved and to build a rank-and-file committee at your school, neighborhood or workplace, fill out the form below, and the *World Socialist Web Site* will contact you today.



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