

“It’s like we are expected and encouraged to get the virus”

Students, educators and parents angered over Chicago Teachers Union deal to reopen schools

James Martin
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As Chicago Public Schools (CPS) students prepare walkouts Friday to oppose unsafe school reopenings during the deadly Omicron surge, anger is mounting against the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU)’s betrayal of the life-and-death concerns of teachers, students and parents.

On Monday, the CTU reached a miserable agreement with Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot and the CPS, in line with the Biden administration and the teachers unions, to keep schools open. The agreement shut down the collective action of 25,000 teachers who voted overwhelmingly to stop unsafe in-person learning in the school district, which is facing unprecedented levels of COVID-19 cases. The rapid surge of Omicron cases over December and January across the country and the Chicago area spread throughout schools and workplaces, provoking widespread concern among teachers, workers and students.

The CTU leadership in the House of Delegates hastily stopped the remote job action this week and sent teachers back to schools before they even had a chance to vote on the agreement. On Wednesday, the CTU claimed the agreement passed by 55.4 percent of teachers in favor. Yet over 20 percent did not vote at all, meaning only 44 percent voted for the deal, which the CTU promoted as the best deal they could get.

CTU President Jesse Sharkey sent a nervous email to teachers noting, “The vote totals tonight are a clear show of dissatisfaction.” He acknowledged, “This agreement covers only a portion of the safety guarantees that every one of our school communities deserve.”

He claimed, “This agreement does give us the enforceable right to additional protections, and we have every intention of organizing at the school level across the city to continue protecting the safety of our students and their families.”

In fact, the toothless measures agreed to by the CTU, including a modicum of testing and the handing out of N95 masks, will do nothing to stop the spread of COVID-19 cases throughout CPS schools and city neighborhoods. Minneapolis and other school districts around the country are shutting down as the virus rampages through schools and communities, with teachers, staff and students not showing up. The 7-day average of cases in Chicago is over 11,850, and the hospitalization rate is at the highest levels it has been, with over 196 Chicagoans current hospitalized every week. The official test positivity rate is currently at 17.7 percent.

In defiance of the treachery of the CTU, hundreds of Chicago working-class students are expected to walk out Friday as student protests spread across the country. The fight by educators and workers in the US is part of a global movement with 75 percent of primary school teachers in France going on a nationwide strike against unsafe conditions yesterday.

Chicago teachers returning to the classrooms this week spoke out against the unsafe conditions they are facing. “Some classrooms are still dirty, the air quality is not that good, and children are not keeping their masks on their faces,” an early childhood CPS teacher told the WSWS. “Now, the CDC is saying it’s okay to go to work with COVID.”

Another CPS teacher told the WSWS, “I went back yesterday. We are at just about less than half capacity. I am still dealing with COVID symptoms so it’s pretty slow going. Nothing is normal. It’s bittersweet being in the building. The thought of tomorrow and the next cycle's paycheck is looking ugly.”

Parents expressed their anger at the CTU as well. Kimberly, a working-class parent in Chicago who attended the emergency meeting of the Midwest Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee on Wednesday, said, “I’ve never been more frustrated with capitalism. I’m in alignment with everything shared yesterday. I want to do my best to change things.”

“I’m really disappointed in the CTU vote last night. My kids currently have COVID. We are doing remote learning [because] two of their three classrooms have had to go remote anyway. We also live with my mom, who is immunocompromised.

“It’s like, as a culture, we’re saying the GDP is worth the death and disability this will cause. I really appreciate [the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee] reaching out. I was so frustrated and disheartened on Tuesday. It’s helpful to have something useful to plug into in terms of changing things.”

Another CPS parent, Dawn, added, “I’m really disappointed that the CTU did this. I don’t know what happened at the bargaining table. You see the students swelling in these other districts. And some of the districts are taking a pause. It’s maddening that they didn’t close schools here too.

“Even if the surge abates, we’re talking about extraordinarily high numbers. Kids are herded into auditoriums like Lane Tech High School. The idea that remote learning keeps them from learning is hogwash.”

Opposition on social media by teachers also remained high. Bridey, a teacher-librarian, voiced her opposition to the CPS-CTU deal on the CTU Facebook page: “What about the schools that were at the 40 percent threshold and still had students come in today? How did that keep any of us safe? Make it make sense.”

Jessica said on Twitter, “I just pulled my kid out of school because of an alarming lack of safety protocols. This is in an area with a huge amount of resources. It’s like we are expected and encouraged to get the virus because of some unfounded idea that if we all get

Omicron, the pandemic will blow over. We are called hypervigilant and neurotic for wanting not ... to ... get ... sick! Bravo to any of us who push back.”

Angry students also condemned the CTU and the Lightfoot administration. One student mocked the union’s claims that it would “listen to the students.” They added, “The safest thing to do now is stay at home for at least TWO weeks. The union and Lightfoot: Ok, [they do] the opposite. If you listen to students then, SEND US REMOTE PLEASE!”

A student group called Good Kids Mad City stated, “Safety is possible! For our members who attend charter schools they’ve been remote learning since winter break! Our members who attend CPS have decided not to go back to school until it’s safe! We’re in solidarity with students walking out on Friday in protest of.”

The opposition of students, teachers and parents must be taken out of the hands of the unions like the CTU and the Democratic Party, which are conspiring to keep the schools open no matter what the human cost.

The Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, part of a global network of rank-and-file safety committees, is leading the fight to save lives and end the pandemic with a Zero COVID strategy. Such a strategy must include the immediate closure of in-person learning until community spread is contained, resources for parents and teachers for high-quality remote education, protection of incomes, and linking the struggles of teachers, workers and students across the country and internationally against the capitalist system that enforces the interests of profits over human lives.

Contact us to join the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee.



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