

Thousands of Chicago students walk out to protest unsafe return to schools

Our reporters
15 January 2022

Thousands of Chicago Public School (CPS) students walked out across more than 30 schools to protest the unsafe return to classrooms enforced by Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot. The walkouts included high school students as well as seventh and eighth graders.

The students joined students in California, New York and Massachusetts who walked out this week to protest in-person learning, which is fueling a massive spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the Biden administration demands that everyone “live with the virus,” including forcing workers to work sick and forcing children to attend school where they will get sick, social anger is breaking to the surface. CPS students chanted of the Democratic mayor, “Lori Lightfoot is guilty as hell!”

Schools are currently the top source of spread of the virus, with over 41 percent of cases linked to schools, according to the Illinois Department of Public Health’s contact tracing data. In Chicago, 196 people are being hospitalized, and 21 are dying every day. The test positivity is very high, at 17.7 percent, officially.

After walking out at individual schools across the city, hundreds of students gathered at the CPS headquarters downtown to protest in the early afternoon. The walkouts have also received the support of teachers and parents who opposed the agreement between CPS and the Chicago Teachers Union to reopen schools to in-person learning, in defiance of overwhelming opposition among educators.

“We want our voices to be heard,” one student walking out of high school told the WSW. “We understand that the teachers are looking out for us... we want to take part in that and support them.”

Another student said, “A lot of people are getting sick. A lot of people are dying.”

One Roberto Clemente Community Academy student

told the WSW. “I don’t think we should be in school. There’s a lot of people getting sick and a lot of teachers missing. We should stay home and do it online. It would be better for us.”

On Monday, the CTU ended the collective action of 25,000 teachers who voted overwhelmingly to stop unsafe in-person learning in the school district and teach remotely. Teachers were sent back to schools before they even had a chance to vote on the agreement, and students returned to schools one day later.

The CTU claimed the agreement passed with 55.4 percent of teachers voting in favor. More than 20 percent of teachers abstained from voting on the deal.

A senior at John Marshall Harlan Community Academy told the WSW: “Our main objective is to demand safer schools. We were told to return to schools Wednesday with no safer conditions, conditions existing the same as before. We all deserve to be safe just as well as the executives who made these decisions... who work remotely from home. It’s tyrannical, hypocritical and unfair.”

On Friday, Illinois’s Democratic Party governor, J.B. Pritzker, wrote in a letter to the state’s teachers unions that he intends to veto a proposal that would grant school employees extra sick leave related to COVID-19 infection, either for employees themselves or their families.

While Lightfoot and the Democratic Party have promoted the reopening of schools by claiming it is “for the students,” many students pointed to the bigger crisis: getting COVID in schools. Another Clemente student said, “They are lying! It’s a scam... They are making people feel more scared by being in school.”

“The mental health thing is a lie,” another student added. “Being at school builds up anxiety because a lot

of people have COVID and don't know they have it."

Jared, a senior at Benito Juarez High School, said, "I'm protesting because CPS has decided not to enable remote learning in this time of need. We need to secure the safety and rightful education of all students. We have to be safe and secure before we can focus on our mental health."

On the walkouts in New York City and Boston, Jared said, "We can get the motion going around the country. If we can stick together and don't budge, we can definitely go through with this."

At the same time, testing in the city of Chicago and across the country is a complete disaster. Students, parents, teachers and workers across the city have struggled to find testing locations for either PCR or antigen tests in a timely manner.

There remains widespread opposition and anger to the CTU-CPS deal from parents, students and teachers. While school administrators are claiming that schools will be "deep cleaned" and will be safe for everyone to return to by Tuesday, school staff are exposing this as a lie.

Mary, a custodian at CPS, shared her support on Facebook for the student walkouts. "I'm glad they are walking out. The schools are not ready for the children. The custodian workers do not have enough time to clean all the rooms that are expected to be clean in a couple hours. They need to have an overnight shift.

"I worked for a cleaning company. I quit because there was so much to do in one school and one building in eight hours, but you still need more time and they need to hire more people to clean. You still have schools that do not have ventilation. Why did they vote to let these children back in the school? I don't agree with it at all."

Jenny, a CPS parent, wrote in support of the student walkouts, "As a parent of a high school student at Lane Tech, I agree!!! Wishing I could post a pic here of the hallways. It's an indoor Lollapalooza everyday," referring to the music festival superspreader event the city of Chicago hosted last August.

Autoworkers in Illinois and Missouri, who face infected workplaces each day, responded enthusiastically to the student walkouts in Chicago and across the country. An autoworker at General Motors' Wentzville Assembly plant, near St. Louis, said: "I think the kids are right. It's their lives, health and

future."

A Kansas City autoworker from the Ford assembly plant said, "I think the students are correct. How do we all unite? It's going to take everybody. Everybody is going to have to do a mass walkout. Some workers don't have a union, and the unions that are there are not being upfront with their people. We all need a mass walkout, organizing, saying 'I've had enough.'"

About conditions at KCAP, he said, "Ten people died at KCAP since Christmas from COVID. Heard it from a retired union committeeman. The union did not say anything about it from the plant. They're protecting the company."

He denounced the medical experts who have falsified the science to keep workers on the job and getting sick: "It's for economics. They don't want to shut down, but I think they're not going to have any other choice. A lot of people who are positive are going to work because they have to pay their bills, they're in a hell of a crunch. Fauci and Walensky are on the side of the elite class and the rich people. They don't want people staying at home."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact