

Chicago students, teachers and workers: Unite! Close all schools and nonessential workplaces to end the pandemic!

Joint statement of the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Committee and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality
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The Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality call on all teachers, students and parents to demand an immediate end to in-person learning to protect the health and safety of educators, students and the larger community.

In Chicago, the spread of the Omicron variant is out of control. The seven-day average of new COVID infections is almost 10,000 per day. Hospitalizations have also risen dramatically to an all-time high of over 200 cases per day. The supposedly “mild” variant has particularly targeted the young, with Lurie Children’s Hospital reporting last week that child hospitalizations have increased 10 times since the end of November.

Urgent and immediate action is needed to bring this situation under control and save lives. Chicago has seen immense opposition to the unsafe reopening of schools from teachers, parents and students alike. However, if this struggle is to be successful, our efforts must not be directed towards trying to convince the corporate-controlled Democratic politicians, media and unions to “do the right thing.” Instead, we have to fight to mobilize the masses of working-class people to join us in the fight to save lives.

Earlier this month Chicago teachers bravely took a stand for health and safety and voted overwhelmingly not to return to in-person classes and to switch to online learning. However, rank-and-file teachers and students were betrayed by the Chicago Teachers Union, which agreed to a deal with Mayor Lori Lightfoot to reopen the schools, no matter what the cost in human lives.

Under the terms of this miserable deal, there will be no districtwide shutdown under any circumstances.

Individual schools will only convert to remote learning if 30-40 percent of the teachers and students are infected or in quarantine. In other words, the schools will close only if everyone is too sick to keep them open!

Lightfoot claimed that it was necessary to open the schools “for the children.” This lie was exploded the day after schools reopened, when thousands of Chicago high school and middle school students walked out to demand remote-only classes until the surge of infections was brought under control.

Students said it was far worse for their mental health to be worried about catching and bringing COVID-19 home to their families than it is to have class online. Indeed, 167,000 children across the US have lost a parent or caregiver to COVID, causing incalculable emotional and psychological damage.

The independent action of students inspired and won the support of teachers, parents and workers throughout the city and more broadly across the US and the world.

The entire political establishment, Republicans and Democrats, wants the schools open so that workers can continue to work in infected workplaces and factories, pumping out profits for the corporations. The same Democratic Party politicians in Chicago professing concern for the education of children have closed hundreds of schools, laid off thousands of teachers and gutted public health programs, including closing half of the city’s mental health clinics in 2012.

As for the Biden administration, it has abandoned any pretense of trying to stop the pandemic, with top officials insisting everyone will be infected.

Across the country and the world, workers and young

people are insisting that their lives are more important than the profits of billionaires and mega-millionaires. Last week, students walked out of schools in New York City, Boston, Oakland, Seattle, Baton Rouge and other cities. Teachers in France also carried out a one-day nationwide strike to demand COVID protections and other improvements.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) is fighting to turn young people to the working class, the essential element in society and the only social force capable of breaking the stranglehold of the corporate and financial aristocracy over society.

Millions of workers—black, white and immigrant—are outraged over the spread of infections in the factories, warehouses, hospitals, transportation hubs and other workplaces. Just last week, a 32-year-old Ford Chicago Assembly Plant worker, Caleb Mateo Dye, lost his life after a long battle with COVID-19.

Lightfoot and the corporate interests that she speaks for can and must be fought. But this requires the building of new organizations of struggle, independent of the bought-and-paid-for unions and the Democratic Party.

In every school, workplace and neighborhood, rank-and-file committees, controlled by workers themselves, should be built to organize strikes, demonstrations and other actions to shut down nonessential production and in-person learning as part of a broader strategy to eliminate COVID-19 entirely.

The Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) call on teachers, students, and the entire working class to join us to fight for the following demands:

- Close all schools and nonessential businesses until the transmission of the virus is stopped and rank-and-file educator committees, working with principled scientists and public health experts, determine that the schools are safe enough to reopen. During the temporary closures, full income protection must be provided to all workers and small business owners.

- Pour billions of dollars into remote learning. Guarantee free, high-quality computers and internet connections and the resources for families to ensure children have a quiet, comfortable place to study and to provide for the nutritional and medical needs of every

child.

- Hire thousands of public health workers to conduct universal testing, contact tracing, quarantining and education on vaccines and the use of masks to protect against airborne transmissions.

- The resources for these life-saving measures are available. Reverse the billions of dollars in tax cuts to the auto companies, healthcare giants and other big businesses, and sharply increase the taxes on the billionaires and mega-billionaires whose fortunes have skyrocketed during the pandemic.

Teachers, Students, and Workers! Take up the fight for safe schools! Unite together and join the Educators Rank-and-File Committee and the IYSSE today!



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