

Chicago student: “Capitalism is poison”

# Educators and students around the world deepen fight to stop the spread of COVID-19

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The wave of educator and student opposition to school reopenings continues to spread across the globe as capitalist governments ever more openly adopt policies to deliberately infect society with COVID-19 and resort to increasingly desperate measures to keep schools and workplaces open.

It is essential that workers realize their struggles are neither isolated nor unique. While speaking different languages, teachers and students describe a universal debacle since schools reopened this year, citing dangerous conditions, widespread infections and record student and staff absences.

## Israel

On Thursday, the Tel Aviv Labor Court issued an injunction against the Israel Teachers Union, forcefully prohibiting a national strike that had been called Wednesday night.

Facing the potential for an explosive wildcat walkout, the union made the last minute call in response to Prime Minister Naftali Bennett’s scrapping of COVID-19 quarantines for all exposed students, which went into effect Thursday despite urging from the Health Ministry to delay the change.

Under the new rules, students who have been exposed to COVID-19 but test negative may return to school immediately, while students who test positive are only required to quarantine for five days, signaling the international consequences of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s own reckless quarantine reduction.

COVID-19 cases have skyrocketed across Israel, with the seven-day average now standing at 80,575, a nearly 7,000 percent increase between December 24 and January 26. Hospitalizations are approaching all-time pandemic highs, with a seven-day average of 2,102 people hospitalized and 214 in the ICU, according to Our World in Data.

Provocative statements by Merom Shiff, Chairman of the National Parenting Leadership group which has demanded schools stay open, reveal the true character of the ruling class’s demand that schools remain open. In an open letter to the president of the teachers union, he wrote, “In Israel, soldiers don’t flee battle... In Israel, teachers don’t leave their kids.” He warned educators against “your wars, your power games, ego trips and hand-wringing.”

These threats, comparing classrooms to occupied territories, have already been put into practice across the US. In Oklahoma, unmasked and armed police were used as “substitutes” last week. In New Mexico, Democratic Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham initiated a program to fast-

track National Guardsmen to fill substitute vacancies.

## Italy

In recent weeks, thousands of students across Italy have protested against dangerous school conditions. A teacher in Italy described conditions in schools to the *World Socialist Web Site*, stating, “There are outbreaks in many classes. Nothing has been done [to make schools safer]. Even the distancing between students is no longer mandatory. The classes are like chicken coops.

“We don’t know how many positive cases there are. We only know the ones in our classes. In some schools there is a lack of both teachers, students and auxiliary staff, so it is impossible to do school. One school called unemployed parents to fill in for teachers. The government’s line is to keep schools open at all costs.

“The student and teacher strikes in the USA and France give me hope. A common fight is needed against the reopening of schools. The initiatives to build a network of independent committees in schools at the national and international level are welcome in order not to feel lonely and disoriented.”

## Illinois

Following the walkout by thousands of students two weeks ago, students in Chicago staged another strike Thursday. Student organizers are now encouraging classmates to stay home to protest rather than hold large in-person rallies.

A Chicago student who helped organize Thursday’s walkout told the WSWWS, “I made the walkout pages because I care for the entire school community. I care because I’m worried. The whole entire situation surrounding the pandemic and the continuation of in-person learning worries me. The virus broke records here, and Chicago Public Schools still has the audacity to keep kids in school... The students are demanding CPS to establish remote learning options.”

Commenting on the sell-out negotiated by the Chicago Teachers Union, the student said, “After the announcement, I was floored honestly. The CTU went through all that trouble just to give in to CPS. If you think about it, CPS manipulated the vote because the teachers were locked out of their Google accounts, so they had no way of communicating with the

students and they weren't getting paid." Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot "played the role of master manipulator" in shutting down the strike.

Asked about the growth of social inequality and the fact that a handful of billionaires have doubled their wealth while millions of people have died and been thrown into poverty, the student concluded, "I think it says a lot about how capitalism is truly a factor into why the world now is so frustratingly split. Capitalism is poison."

On Wednesday, members of the Champaign Federation of Teachers (CFT) in Champaign, Illinois, voted by 91 percent to authorize a strike and to reject the school board's contract proposal. Teachers voted strongly against the contract in part because of a proposal to extend the school day by 50 minutes.

In a telling statement, CFT co-President Mike Sitch told *The News-Gazette* that the union leadership was "anxious and ready" and would "be available all the time" to hold discussions with the board and district. Indicating that the union has no intention of actually calling a strike, he said, "We're going to be in class tomorrow, we're going to be in class Friday, we're going to be in class next week, we're going to be in class in the foreseeable future." Champaign teachers have been working under a contract that expired over the summer.

While not explicitly citing the spread of COVID-19, the pandemic certainly influenced Wednesday's overwhelming strike vote. Educators across the US have universally reported exhaustion and the scrapping of planning hours and lunch breaks to compensate for staffing shortages. Amid the Omicron surge, cases have reached record highs in Champaign-Urbana, with 1,253 active cases according to the Public Health District's website.

Joining the wave of student opposition in Chicago and internationally, graduate student workers at the University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana campus circulated a petition to demand the ability to work remotely in addition to increased mitigation measures. The petition has received over 1,200 signatures from graduate and undergraduate students, faculty and staff.

## **Birmingham, Alabama**

On Sunday, facing record staffing shortages caused by COVID-19 infections and quarantines, and threatened with a teacher sickout, Birmingham City Schools in Alabama switched the district to remote learning on Monday and Tuesday. At least 200 teachers in the district, recognizing that two days does not significantly stop transmission, nevertheless went forward with the sickout on Wednesday, when classes resumed in person. Additionally, 144 teachers were literally out sick that day, meaning 13 percent of all staff were absent.

The district documented a record 468 cases among students last week, in line with the record 26,260 cases in K-12 schools across Alabama.

A veteran Alabama teacher commented on the economic and political interests behind the campaign to force schools open, telling the WWSW, "They do not care about the state of education in the US. We teachers are glorified babysitters. In Alabama all you have to be is 18 years old to sub. They want bodies in the building to watch kids so that parents can go to work to make money for the corporations."

Teachers will continue the sickout through today, though no confidence can be placed in the Birmingham Federation of Teachers (BFT) to carry forward a genuine struggle to ensure remote learning. Like the national American Federation of Teachers with which it is affiliated, and its counterpart in Chicago, the BFT is willing to compromise on the essential demand of universal remote instruction, while doing nothing to unite

teachers across districts and nationally.

## **Jefferson County, Mississippi**

In neighboring Mississippi, bus drivers in the rural district of Jefferson County enacted a one-day strike last Friday. Facing a driver shortage exacerbated by the pandemic, the school board voted to hire coaches, retired drivers and teachers with CDLs at the rate of \$25 per hour, double the wage of the regular drivers.

By Friday afternoon, the board held an emergency meeting and voted to increase the drivers' pay to \$20 an hour, a raise of 66 percent for the lowest-paid drivers.

## **Richmond, California**

Following a series of wildcat sickouts by students and teachers in Oakland, California, over 1,500 teachers and staff in the West Contra Costa Unified School District, based in nearby Richmond, have been authorized to strike over COVID-19 safety concerns. The local union, United Teachers of Richmond (UTR), an affiliate of the National Education Association, authorized a strike following a poll taken over the weekend in which 72 percent of teachers voted in favor of a strike.

Like their counterparts across the US and internationally, educators have cited dangerous conditions in schools and record absences of staff and students. The district's attendance figures show that over a third of students have missed class since schools reopened in January.

Students voiced their safety concerns and demanded remote instruction at a school board meeting on January 13. One said, "This entire week, I feel like I am choosing between my health, the health of my family versus my education. I shouldn't have to make this decision."

In statements to the *East Bay Times* that sound nearly identical to those of the Champaign Federation of Teachers' president, UTR President Marissa Glidden revealed that the union will do everything in its power to avert a strike and is relying on the district to concede to a few mitigation measures to avert a full-blown rebellion, as was accomplished earlier this week in Oakland. Referring to the district officials, Glidden said, "We believe they hear us... We are willing to sit down and negotiate for as long as it takes this week—as many hours as necessary—to come up with a plan."

Teachers must learn the lessons of the past two years in order to prevent a third year of catastrophe and mass death. This requires a decisive break with the unions, which intervene when opposition has reached a boiling point only to immediately "negotiate" a forced return to the classroom.

Against the parochialism of the unions, the fight against the pandemic requires a conscious international perspective and an organizational framework for uniting the working class in every country. We call on educators, parents and students to join and build the network of rank-and-file safety committees that are fighting for this perspective today.



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