

# Chicago Teachers Union scuttles strike at ChiArts High School and helps keep students and teachers in sweltering classrooms during a dangerous heatwave

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The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) called off a planned Wednesday strike at the Chicago High School for the Arts (ChiArts). In a tweet sent out at 11:12 p.m. on Tuesday, literally the 11th hour, the union claimed a “major breakthrough at the bargaining table” and ordered teachers to report to work in the morning even though negotiations were still ongoing.

School officials told the *Chicago Sun-Times* that the ChiArts board and the teachers union finally produced a tentative agreement after meeting all day Wednesday. Teachers had been without a contract since the last one expired June 30, 2022.

The new four-year agreement covers all 103 teachers at the school. The CTU did not release any pay details, but claims the agreement includes “a considerable increase in educator salaries and benefits to buttress the impacts of inflation and ensure that ChiArts can continue to recruit and retain highly qualified educators.” However, BlockClub Chicago reported school officials had already agreed last week to a 16 percent pay raise for teachers over four years, leaving teachers with a decrease in their real wages.

According to the CTU, the deal, which it calls “historic,” will bring the student-to-counselor ratio at the school to 250-to-1, merely bringing the school into line with the base recommendation of the American School Counselors Association. The agreement also stipulates the hiring of a full-time social worker by next year, as well as a certified nursing assistant, and increased support services at some unspecified point.

Purported wins on special education and bilingual services are toothless, amounting to merely a “commitment from management to provide services for every student entitled to them, including caseload limits for special education classrooms.” Indeed, most of the provisions of the agreement touted by the union commit ChiArts management to very little, especially in the way of expenses, for such things as making ChiArts a sanctuary school, providing “adequate” protections for LGBTQIA+ students and staff, diversity and inclusion training, and “ensuring a voice of teaching artists as well as students and families in direction of the school going forward.”

ChiArts is a contract school, similar to a charter school in that it is privately managed and has its own independent board of directors. Located in the Humboldt Park neighborhood on the city’s West Side, ChiArts enrolls around 600 students from across the city and provides an art-focused curriculum.

Teachers at ChiArts, fed up with years of being underpaid and understaffed, even relative to regular CPS district schools, voted to authorize a strike by a margin of 99 percent. They had staged a one-day strike in 2019, which was cut off when an agreement was announced the

first evening. According to the union, under the last expired contract, teachers at ChiArts were paid the equivalent of what regular CPS teachers were making in 2018-2019. The union also reported on September 1 that the school’s offer at that point would have seen first-year teachers offered \$56,178 to start, compared to \$61,990 for regular district teachers.

The union has claimed members will have a few days to review the agreement and vote on ratification, but there is no indication teachers will be presented with the full final agreement before being forced to make a decision.

Besides smothering strikes, the CTU has spent the last few weeks trying to put down a rebellion of teachers against the decision to keep schools open during the recent historic heatwave. A rank-and-file member of the Chicago Teachers Union shared some of the comments by other rank-and-file educators and the responses by the CTU leadership in a CTU members’ Facebook group. These posts lay bare the unsafe conditions that prevailed in CPS and affiliated charter schools during the record-breaking August 23-24 heatwave.

The CTU sent its 28,300 educators to work in literal sweatshop conditions in schools while the heat index reached 116 degrees Fahrenheit on Wednesday, August 23, and 120 degrees on Thursday, August 24. The latter smashed Chicago’s previous record of 118 degrees in the summer of 1995 when over 700 working class and poor Chicagoans perished due to lack of access to air conditioning.

Rather than using all his resources to ensure sufficient air conditioning in every classroom and school bus as a precondition to keep schools open in the days leading up to the hottest day in Chicago’s recorded history, Mayor Brandon Johnson spent his time distributing frozen pizzas as part of a back-to-school promotional event.

At one of these events on Monday, August 21, Johnson gave the following public remarks: “Our children are our future, and I cherish the opportunity to start the school year off right by handing out one of Chicago’s signature dishes to thousands of our youth. Thank you to CPD, CFD, DFSS, CPS, and Home Run Inn for making this event possible and making our kids’ first day a little brighter.”

## “My classroom is sweltering”

On Tuesday, August 22, the school district released a statement which falsely claimed that “all CPS classrooms are equipped with air conditioning.” However, in the Facebook group educators made a series

of posts expressing their concerns about the coming heatwave.

“Why is school not canceled tomorrow? Knowing half of these AC units don’t work?!” read one popular post.

“CPS is always in a crisis,” a teacher commented. “My old [classroom] windows only opened a few inches. I also brought fans. Swirls around hot air but it’s better than nothing.”

“My [class]room is sweltering,” another teacher shared.

On Wednesday, August 23, temperatures reached into the 80s and 90s inside classrooms in Chicago. One teacher shared photos with the WSWWS of a thermometer registering 80 degrees inside a classroom equipped with an air-conditioning unit. “Kitchen and maintenance staff working with no A/C in my building,” this teacher reported, additionally sharing that several air conditioning units in their school either malfunctioned or had died by the afternoon as the extreme heat became too much for the old units in disrepair to handle.

Teachers also commented on a communication sent out by CPS informing the public that 4 ounces of water per student would be allotted during the heatwave.

“Is the 4 oz of water to be used to splash on a student’s face when they pass out?” one teacher asked.

“Abuse!” commented another teacher. “DCFS should get involved. Isn’t neglect and child endangerment a crime?”

CTU Executive Board member Hilario Dominguez attempted to intervene into the discussion by teachers in the Facebook group in order to defend the decision to keep schools open during the dangerous heatwave. “This heat wave is a disaster,” Dominguez began. “[But] I still believe closing schools isn’t the answer when many of our kids don’t have AC at [home]. So how can we work together to figure this out?”

Teachers responded with justified hostility: “Dude, I like you, but you’re sitting in AC at 1901 W Carroll St [CTU Headquarters]. That’s easy for you to say. My closet [reference to former coat closets repurposed into small group classrooms/workspaces] doesn’t have AC. Collaboration? Collect some data on what rooms/workspaces, actually have AC and when were the filters changed??? Then, tell our mayor to stop making excuses for CPS. ... Some rooms are over 90 degrees.”

Another teacher reported, “Half our rooms’ AC went out because the old school building couldn’t handle all the AC units running on high at the same time. Our admin spent the day relocating whole classes. My room was a sauna. And kids with disabilities were stuck on those long bus rides without AC. CPS infrastructure simply cannot handle this level of heat.”

CTU President Stacy Davis Gates responded to the accusation that union officials were sitting comfortably in their offices by protesting, “Actually, one of our compressors is broken and the part is on back order. It’s not as comfortable as one would think.”

While teachers failed to offer their sympathies, a few of them hit the “laugh” reaction on the CTU president’s comment.

In response to Davis Gates, one teacher commented, “One? Lucky building! No air in at least 2 classrooms at my school and the gym. And where there was air it was either still hot, or the units were leaking... Meaning a sped [Special Education] child’s parent had to come get them because there was no AC on the bus.”

Responding to this teacher, Davis Gates boasted about the fact that there is any air conditioning at all in Chicago’s schools: “You don’t understand why? Are you serious!? ... Today was the first test. It ain’t perfect and it’s remarkably different and I’ve been in public education longer than five years. And, the fact that we even have an AC is because we WON it in the 2012 contract fight.”

The teacher replied, “Logical would be CPS making sure the ACs weren’t broken over the summer. Reporting it is not a magic wand.”

## “This is criminal negligence”

Another teacher’s post read, “So CTU, what is your suggestion for us?! This heat is oppressive and with no air conditioning or circulation! I would think the union would have stood up during this crisis. Yet my dues went up! Why?!? What you all doing besides following the mayor?!?”

A teacher asked Davis Gates, “What will a [CTU] safety committee do??? What kind of power do they have??? This is a serious question.”

To which Davis Gates replied, “So far, gotten compressors fixed, portable units brought out to schools and more engineering support.”

A teacher replied to Davis Gates, “It was 90 degrees in multiple classrooms today! Multiple! ... Saying there’s been a response is a joke! My principal was wheeling around iced coolers with bottled waters and was refilling water stations. His effort is off the charts and there’s only so much our admin can do! He has been arguing with CPS for almost five years to get our AC fixed.”

In response to this teacher, Davis Gates complained about “the way y’all get on this app and go off on me.”

When Davis Gates told teachers to form union-controlled safety committees, a teacher replied, “As someone who has served on a [CTU] safety committee, I’m well aware of their ineffectiveness.” The teacher added sarcastically, “Surely the district and admin will begin to respect [CTU] safety committees now after three years of ineffectiveness, and definitely in time for uh, today [Wednesday night].”

Another teacher had this to say about the “solutions” offered by a CTU-controlled safety committee after reporting unsafe conditions: “That portable air conditioner was a joke because we couldn’t close the window. It was 95 degrees, three adults and 15 kids. Make it make sense and tomorrow even hotter. In a blended classroom.”

Teachers also elaborated on conditions in their schools, with one writing, “The old building second floor was inhumane. Especially rooms on the west side of the building. Yes, windows that have shades were closed. Not sure what the option is for windows that don’t have shades. Engineer says shades are a CPS problem and not school level.”

Yet another teacher had this to say about conditions in their classroom: “Scene: it’s 111 [degrees] outside. Email from admin: lower the blinds and turn off the lights. My [elementary school] classroom: 24 students sitting in the dark in an 82-degree classroom doing math. This ain’t it.”

Another teacher commented on the abysmal reporting on the situation in Chicago by the bourgeois press: “NPR said CPS has air conditioners in every classroom. Lol.”

As discussions continued through the evening of Wednesday, August 23 in the Chicago teachers’ Facebook group, educators raised the demand for the closing of schools the next day, Thursday, August 24, the day that would become the hottest day in Chicago’s recorded history. “It was too hot today,” one teacher wrote. “Only supposed to get hotter tomorrow. These AC units can’t handle this level of heat plus humidity. Let’s talk about an emergency closing. ... Many buses for students with disabilities were not air conditioned. This is incredibly dangerous.”

Another teacher described the deplorable conditions on CPS school buses: “Currently most of the buses running in CPS are transporting cluster students. The majority of those buses do not have AC. At my school we have 5 buses picking up our cluster students, only one is supposed to have AC and it was not working. Our students have significant medical concerns and the heat can cause seizures and asthma attacks. Just to illustrate how dangerous this is, last year our lunchroom got above 85 degrees, we had three students seize at the same time at lunch. Students can be on the bus for an hour plus in this heat, this is dangerous. I understand the need for school to function as cooling centers essentially but why are we having mandatory attendance? What about the kids having to commute home on the CTA tomorrow during the hottest

part of the day? Not every building is fully air conditioned, if kids can stay home safely they should.”

As one teacher put it sharply, “This is criminal negligence. Criminal.”

The winning of teachers’ critical safety demands, including the right to not be exposed to dangerous levels of heat in schools, to say nothing of their demands for adequate pay and conditions for learning, will not be realized within the bankrupt framework of the CTU’s “safety committees,” but in genuine rank-and-file safety committees, free from control by the comfortably air-conditioned bureaucratic apparatus which is distant from and hostile to the interests of rank-and-file educators.



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