

Chicago Public Schools kept open without power, heat or running water during snowstorm and bitter cold

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On January 12, 32 Chicago Public Schools lost power during most or all of the school day when schools were kept open in spite of a winter storm warning issued by the National Weather Service, which the previous day had warned of “heavy snow, strong winds and dangerous conditions” from 3 a.m. Friday, January 12 through 12 p.m. Saturday, January 13, as well as “difficult to impossible” travel conditions during the morning and evening commutes that Friday.

In a Facebook group for Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) members, teachers reported on and discussed the dangerous conditions they faced in their schools on Friday, including reports of no heat or running water in some schools.

A rank-and-file member of the Chicago Teachers Union shared comments by many of the educators impacted by the action (or inaction) of Chicago Public Schools, the CTU leadership and Mayor Brandon Johnson in keeping teachers, staff and students in schools without power or heat during a winter storm.

One teacher posted, “My school has no lights, no heat, and no water ... but we’re open.”

Numerous teachers reported that their situation was similar and noted the health and safety problems it posed. Posts included:

“Ours as well.”

“Ditto over here.”

“We have no power at my school.”

“[CPS school] on north side running on generators.”

“No heat, no lights, no internet at my school either.”

“Same.”

“Same.”

“There are so many with this issue! It’s ridic!”

“Same!!! This is stupid!!!!”

“Sounds like multiple health violations.”

One teacher elaborated:

We couldn’t handle hot days in the summer!!! CPS does not have the infrastructure to handle extreme weather events. Looks like they forgot about the summer heat disaster... it’s still amateur hour over there!!! The buildings are crumbling and it is clearly NOT safe to be in school today!!!!

Other teachers commented:

“9 students, low heat, no electricity, no internet.”

“The weight of the snow is knocking out power. My classroom, along with half the school, is without power, heat, and wifi.”

“We have no power and no heat.”

While teachers were sending these messages from their cold, dark school buildings, the Chicago Teachers Union sent out an email update to members that said nothing about the winter storm, and instead cited a report by CTU President Stacy Davis Gates touting as a “remarkable accomplishment” the fact that “nearly 40 percent of our NBCTs [National Board Certified Teachers] are teachers of color.”

One teacher’s post asked, “Why are we here with no lights and no heat??”

“Because Brandon Johnson won’t close schools,” another teacher answered. “Meanwhile, I’m sure he and his staff are working from home today.”

Teachers directed their anger at Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson, formerly a county commissioner and lobbyist for the Chicago Teachers Union. Referring to their upcoming 2024 contract battle, teachers posted:

“‘But Brandon ... he’s one of us, he’s got our back...’ Nope.”

“Brandon also has kids living on packed buses in parking lots. ‘Out of touch’ is generous.”

“Brandon’s gonna give us a sh*tty contract, isn’t he? If he can’t even call a snow day, imagine negotiating a contract!”

“Time to go risk our lives so our mayor doesn’t need to make a slightly difficult political decision.”

“He’s going to sell us out. Then the union and CORE will have to answer for it.”

“I thought a CTU mayor was different.”

“I guess we should start gearing up for a strike. I have no faith in Brandon to give us a good contract.”

“Our union leadership is never going to strike with him as mayor.”

Johnson campaigned on his political proximity to the CTU, reassuring the banks and business leaders that this would make it easier to enact the cuts Democrats expected to make in the coming years, once federal emergency funding from the COVID-19 pandemic ended. At a March 2023 election forum he said:

There will be some tough decisions to be made when I am mayor of the city of Chicago. And there might be a point within negotiations that the Chicago Teachers Union quest and fight for more resources—we might not be able to do it. Who is better able to deliver bad news to a friend than a friend?

Another teacher commented, “Johnson has shown that he’s not much different than previous mayors,” adding sarcastically, “I’m so glad that our union spent millions of dollars on his campaign.”

Teachers pointed out the hypocrisy of the CTU:

“We criticized [former mayor] Lightfoot for the same thing. [Johnson’s] the mayor and he’s in charge.”

“Every other similar situation in the past, our union pressured the mayor. He could have demanded CPS close.”

“I wonder if the mayor’s staff, CPS central office and CTU staff are working from home today?”

Several teachers also described the dangerous conditions on the road during their commutes:

“45 white knuckle minutes on the Dan Ryan.”

“It’s the unnecessary traffic. The more cars out in this, the more dangerous for everyone.”

“Drove 35 mph on the Edens, couldn’t see the lanes, and the streetlights were out in some places.”

“No streets are plowed around me! Cars are stuck and blocking major streets to get to my school!! Our parking lot isn’t plowed!!! Sidewalks aren’t cleared to get to doors!!!! If they cared, and not just wanted us here, they could’ve at least made it safer for us to arrive.”

“My friend called in a pile-up and the 911 person said, ‘It’s treacherous conditions. No one should be out.’”

“Roads are complete ice and unplowed!! If they were plowed, it’s so windy the snow is closing across them!”

One educator explained:

We do not actually have plows on every street, and you can look at the plow tracker to see that many of them are simply sitting in parking lots. ... My [students] ... 80-90% of whom live outside our large boundaries due to this Hunger Games system we continue to accept, do not all have appropriate attire and frankly would be safer at home instead of on the roads/taking multiple buses and trains for extensive amounts of time. I see a lot of kids without coats. ... Why do you want them to go outside in this [weather]? Like at all?

Other teachers agreed:

“I’m appalled at the fact that Central Office has been allowed to work from home, but students and teachers had to brave the snow. Someone almost hit my vehicle on my way to work this morning for six students. No one cares about our safety.”

“There was no plows out anywhere on the south side! I live by a major street and in all the years of snow my block and the major

street ALWAYS had the trucks out very early! Nothing had been touched when I left out this morning!”

“It’s asinine to put this high number of staff members onto the road.”

“Only cars on the road are CPS employees.”

CTU official and former *Socialist Worker* contributor Nathan Goldbaum intervened into the discussion by rank-and-file teachers in order to defend the CPS: He wrote:

“CPS is no longer stonewalling everything CTU. That’s a change. ... Now they aren’t being told by their bosses to oppose everything CTU.”

One teacher took Goldbaum to task, telling him, “That’s because the CTU isn’t *asking* for what they have in the past in the *exact same situations.* This isn’t really hard to understand.”

In response to concerns raised by teachers about dangerous commuting conditions, Goldbaum said, “The streets were safe,” (reminding one of the old joke: “Who are you going to believe, me or your own eyes?”)

From the start, the *World Socialist Web Site* warned about the reactionary orientation of the incoming Johnson administration. During his election campaign, Johnson claimed to “understand the value of working class people.” But the experience of Chicago’s rank-and-file educators and the working class more broadly makes clear that the value placed on workers by Johnson and the Democratic Party (no less than the Republicans) is minuscule.

Johnson went to work for the CTU in 2011, as part of the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE) leadership of the union. In 2012, the CTU shut down that year’s teachers strike, paving the way for the mass shuttering of schools and layoffs of teachers and staff. Its sellout of another strike in 2019 brought a five-year deal with pay increases of barely 3 percent a year, far below the rate of inflation, and toothless staffing agreements that remain unfulfilled.

CORE’s claim to represent some sort of “progressive” or “democratic” alternative to business unionism was shattered when it forced through the reopening of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic against overwhelming opposition from rank-and-file teachers, who were supported by parents and students.

After such bitter experiences, teachers and the working class more broadly will not receive the “bad news” of budget cuts from Johnson, speaking for the financiers and real estate moguls, as coming from a “friend.”

Educators and workers must form and build their own organizations to fight for their interests—rank-and-file committees independent of the union bureaucracies, which can offer nothing but sellout contracts and deteriorating living standards for workers and their families.



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