

Chicago teachers docked pay and locked out of virtual classrooms for not teaching in-person

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To prevent the reopening of schools, Chicago educators are organizing independently of the CTU through the formation of an Illinois Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. We aim to unite educators, parents, students and the broader working class, to prepare strike action to close all schools and nonessential workplaces. We urge all those who want to join this struggle to send us your contact information today.

Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot and officials at Chicago Public Schools (CPS) have continued their aggressive push to reopen schools in order to get more parents back to work, while the COVID-19 pandemic continues to rage throughout the city and surrounding region.

In the latest escalation of the school district's aggressive posture, 147 teachers were labeled as "absent without leave" and vindictively docked pay for not reporting to school buildings on Monday. These teachers were additionally locked out of their district-provided Google accounts, meaning they were unable to continue teaching their students remotely as they had done since March.

At a press conference Monday, CPS CEO Janice Jackson maintained a hard line on these suspensions, saying, "Any teacher who will be denied access to their Google [account] or pay—they have had several conversations and warnings and reminders and opportunities to explain why they aren't at work. We've gone above and beyond."

The 147 locked-out teachers were part of a larger group of 915 educators who did not report on Monday, 678 of whose absences were designated as unexcused by the district. Another 90 were reported to have failed the district's "health screener" questionnaire, requiring them to stay home. Those locked out were reported to have been those who did not report for any days during the previous week.

The spinelessness and bankruptcy of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) has been on full display in response to this provocation by the district. The union is doing nothing to mobilize its nearly 30,000 members in a defense campaign

or to prepare for strike action. Instead, they informed the *Chicago Sun-Times* that a group of these locked-out teachers "are planning to set up workspaces tomorrow in front of school board president Miguel del Valle's Belmont Cragin home," undoubtedly at the encouragement of the CTU.

The number of educators ordered to report to school buildings has fallen to around 3,800 from around 5,800 before the beginning of last week. At the same time, it is unclear how many students have actually shown up at school. While the district reported 6,000 students were expected, actual student attendance numbers have not been released and some teachers and principals are reporting that attendance is much lower.

This is not a surprise. The CPS reopening plan required parents to opt-in for in-person learning, of which only 37 percent did, for a total of about 77,000 students out of the district total of 350,000. The first phase, which comprises Pre-K and special education cluster program students, is to be followed on February 1 by the much larger group of 71,000 Kindergarten through 8th grade students that opted-in.

Despite claims by Lightfoot and CPS that the schools have been made ready to receive students, many teachers on social media have reported dirty classrooms, likely uncleaned since last March, as well as classrooms without air purifiers or any kind of effective ventilation.

Teachers and school staff at McCutcheon Elementary have already reported that they were alerted to a positive COVID-19 test result by a staff member on Sunday, after the worker was last on campus last Wednesday. The positive result necessitated the quarantine of the school's principal, assistant principal and four other staff.

Despite the dangers of reopening schools in the middle of a raging pandemic with high community spread, indicated by the current test positivity rate of over 10 percent for Chicago and much higher numbers in some neighborhoods, CPS spokeswoman Emily Bolton absurdly claimed, "There

is no evidence of school-based transmission and numerous studies have shown that schools have not been major sites of COVID-19 transmission.”

In fact, according to contact tracing data from the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH), schools remain the second-most common potential exposure location. Additionally, studies conducted internationally during the pandemic have shown that schools contribute to community spread when test positivity rates are high. A recent study published in *Nature Human Behavior* found that closing schools is the second most effective intervention that can be carried out to slow the spread of COVID-19 in the community.

The danger of the pandemic is also evident from Lightfoot’s Sunday extension of the city’s stay-at-home advisory until January 22, which she has not reconciled with the drive to reopen schools.

At a City Council hearing on the reopening, Dr. Marielle Fricchione, medical director of the Chicago Department of Public Health, falsely claimed that Chicago “has control” over the COVID-19 pandemic. She also claimed teachers are “very good at infection control” because they have an “innate sense” of whether things like surfaces or objects are clean because of their extensive experience being around sick children.

Dr. Kenneth Fox, chief health officer for CPS, said city leaders should have confidence in reopening schools, stating, “There are a billion school children back in school now, that were out in March, but people learned and they did things they were afraid of, they took that chance because they understood the damage that is caused to children by not being in school.”

The real concern of Fox is not the damage done to children’s learning, but rather to corporate profits. As Lightfoot said in a letter written to state senators in opposition to a bill which would expand the ability of the CTU to bargain over matters besides pay and benefits—including reopening conditions—passing it “would impair our efforts to reopen Chicago Public Schools and jeopardize our fiscal and educational gains.”

The passage of the bill Monday by the state Senate has now given the initiative to Democratic billionaire governor J.B. Pritzker to try to force a settlement between CTU and the school district. City aldermen and figures in the state government are worried that Lightfoot’s fast pace for reopening threatens to spark a rebellion among teachers and the wider working class. The majority of the city’s aldermen, 37 out of 50, have publicly opposed CPS’ reopening plan.

For its part, the CTU is eager to come to an agreement with CPS that would slightly delay a full reopening in time

for teachers to be given a first dose of the vaccine. In exchange, they are seeking a more permanent seat at the table in managing the economic and political crisis.

On Tuesday, union vice president Stacy Davis Gates reported that the CPS school board seems more willing for an agreement than they have been, and said, “In a pandemic where each day forward looks worse than the day we left, it requires accommodation, partnership and clarity. It is what the pandemic requires.”

Union President Jesse Sharkey has already agreed in principle to the reopening of schools without a health metric like test positivity rate, and reports have suggested the union would be willing to reopen after teachers get just a first dose of the vaccine, or even on a voluntary basis.

Not only would such a plan cause a public health disaster by spreading the disease among unvaccinated children and their parents, it is an absolutely monstrous attempt to split the working class and undermine resistance to the unsafe reopening of non-essential businesses.

The truth is the CTU is fundamentally opposed to leading a strike or joint action. Their primary concern is that they might not be able to contain and smother any such struggle that breaks out independently of their control.

The entire strategy of the CTU centers on their appeal to Democratic officials and office-holders. Indeed, in a tweet issued Tuesday as part of the pseudo-left Demand Safe Schools “Day of Resistance,” the CTU appealed directly to the incoming Biden administration, which is committed to the reopening of schools and the economy.

While saying nothing about last week’s fascist coup attempt orchestrated by Donald Trump, they wrote on Twitter, “The stories of immunocompromised educators already being denied accommodations and leave prove that we cannot rely on our local districts to provide for our safety. We need national leadership from @JoeBiden and @KamalaHarris”.

Workers need their own strategy and organization, wholly independent of both big business parties and the pro-corporate unions. We urge all Chicago educators to get involved with the formation of an Illinois Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee by signing up today at wsws.org/edsafety!



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact