

# Working conditions and the return to schools in the USA

*Jackson Potter<sup>1</sup>*

I will refer to the context of the United States in general, and teachers in public schools in Chicago more specifically, in the face of the outbreak of Covid which around March 20, 2020, forced the closure of schools in Chicago and their conversion to remote schools.

The mayor of Chicago was initially reluctant and adopted President Donald Trump's position that teachers were essential workers, even though we knew very little about the disease. The position on economic revival as more urgent than preserving human life, was adopted nationally and locally by political leaders, but we resisted and we were able to get the schools closed. Initially we stayed remote in the fall term, but starting in January 2021 the mayor began to attract students and teachers back to school under a hybrid model of attending partially in person, partially at a distance. Except for preschool teachers who were forced to return face-to-face. So the return began with kindergarten through eighth grade and eventually high school.

This management method and strategy reduced our solidarity because they were able to separate people into different groups, but it also led to incredible resistance and once the preschool teachers were brought back, many of us refused to go back in person. We refused to report in unless it was on the computer remotely because there were no adequate mitigation measures or safeguards in place and there was a lot of concern that more students would get sick. Many of my students were in a low-income neighborhood, primarily Mexican, in Chicago. Many of their family members were sick, many died, so the spread of Covid in the schools was a real problem.

---

<sup>1</sup> Chicago Teachers Union (CTU)

When our kindergarten-level members refused to return they were threatened with punishment, with being fired. We rallied to support them and each other, as well as demand less class time, more staff, access to vaccinations for both teachers and students, Covid testing, a metric to determine when we would have to close schools if there was an outbreak, contact tracing, masks and hand sanitizer and the elimination of any punishment for teachers refusing to work in unsafe conditions.

In the end we won a lot of those things in an agreement, a back-to-work agreement. There have been challenges. A lack of computers and a lot of undocumented families, Mexican families, Latin American families, immigrant families, did not receive any financial assistance from the government during this period even though many people were laid off from their jobs. We had homeless students who did not receive additional services or support during this period and many students faced mental health issues, so we conducted outreach with parents and community stakeholders to collectively define acceptable conditions in both hybrid and remote forms, as well as our vision for public schools during this period and after Covid.

We didn't want to go back to normality, that was unacceptable. In the face of inequalities that deprive some of education, we also did a lot of mutual aid to make sure that families were fed and had cash assistance. Teachers raised a lot of money and support for families that weren't getting it and, really, the center of the debate in the United States was an argument about survival - do people have basic rights during a pandemic? Or do we have to go to work and risk our lives? Those were the questions, and the pandemic forced us, our members and society at large, to really embrace anti-capitalist and anti-racist values. The Black Lives Matter movement in protest of the murder of George Floyd during this period became the largest protest movement in U.S. history.

We have learned the importance of broad health coalitions, of the fight for a different kind of education. In LA, for example, they won a new school model called “**sustainable community schools**”, 50 schools that are created with parents, students and community groups and that have a different pedagogy which really emphasizes gradual release, instead of adhering to the rules or getting a job for the state or for the system. There are some opportunities and chances to fight for another education.

I think we have reduced reliance on standardized testing because of the conception of new thinking. More university systems are rejecting standardized testing. However, the threat is there. We are facing more racial and economic disparities in the U.S. and the world, and that will worsen when government aid begins to dwindle. For example, in Chicago 60,000 people are in danger of being evicted from their homes because they can't pay the rent and 20,000 are in danger of losing their homes because they can't pay the mortgage.

Faced with such difficulties, we are more aware of the importance of socialization in pedagogy and direct experience. And we are facing threats. As Andrée Gacoin mentioned, there is more surveillance technology governing our teaching and learning. Another threat is our lack of coordination and international solidarity. We can do more - redouble efforts for public education, demand equity in resources, equity in vaccinations. As Fidel Garcia said, while in some countries we are waiting for boosters, there are places like Honduras where teachers are still waiting to receive their first vaccination.

One opportunity we have to raise awareness of economic and racial inequalities is the possibility of growing local and national political transformation. The United States continues to be a threat to the world, the far right still has a lot of power and I don't think it's unlikely, unfortunately, that Trump or someone like him will win re-election in the next cycle. And that threatens the ability of the planet to survive, not only the political possibilities in the United States. In the face of this, it is necessary to keep talking and keep building. So thank you for this opportunity.