

As coronavirus cases climb, Chicago city council expands mayor's emergency powers

By Kristina Betinis
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As the number of COVID-19 infections continues to climb in Chicago, the Democratic administration of Mayor Lori Lightfoot is consolidating emergency powers that increase executive control over the budget, both for the mayor herself and city department heads.

This week, Illinois reported sharp increases in infection rates, with 2,724 new cases on Friday, bringing the total to 39,658 cases and 1,795 reported deaths. These figures are a substantial underrepresentation of the real infection rates. Just this week the state began administering mass testing, hitting close to 10,000 tests per day Friday. The state is reporting the fourth largest number of coronavirus cases in the US, after New York, New Jersey and Connecticut.

The state government is expecting a high point for the rate of infections next month. Democratic Governor J.B. Pritzker has extended Illinois' stay-at-home order through May 30.

Nursing home illness and deaths tracked by the Chicago *Sun-Times* report 4,298 coronavirus cases and 625 deaths in the state's nursing homes. A nursing home in the South Shore neighborhood in Chicago has 111 confirmed cases among its 158 residents, with ten dead. Infectious disease expert Alexander Stemer told ABC7 Chicago, "This will be normal until we have a vaccine."

Six people at Cook County Jail have died, where more than 700 inmates and staff have tested positive, and ten Stateville Prison inmates have died from the coronavirus.

On Friday, the board of aldermen (city council) voted 29–21 to approve a measure that expands the emergency decision-making powers of Mayor Lightfoot and city department heads. This measure codifies Lightfoot's executive order from March and

puts an end date of June 30 on the special powers. Decisions no longer requiring council approval would include emergency contracting authority up to \$1 million, reallocation of city funds by the city's budget director, overriding the budget the council approved last November, and to lease and occupy property.

The mayor's measure has been criticized as overreaching by a significant section of the city council, which is itself roiled by competition over anticipated federal funding. The mayor repeatedly denounced the opposition in the press as selfish and short-sighted, saying, "Dear lord, in the middle of a pandemic. Enough with the selfish political stunts."

In an attempt to win additional support, Lightfoot's team on Wednesday introduced a revised version of the measure that let her emergency powers expire June 30, promising appropriations will only be applied to pandemic-related purchases, and offering weekly summaries of emergency spending and contracting activity to the city's budget committee.

The Wednesday vote on the measure was procedurally blocked by five aldermen, to take place the next meeting of the city council which Lightfoot announced would be Friday afternoon.

As the mayor uses the pandemic to consolidate power, competition is roiling the city council over federal funding, mostly from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, that is anticipated to reimburse emergency spending. One south side alderman, Jason Earvin, commented that an alderman's loss of power to the mayor through the executive order meant losing access to those funds.

The mayor of Chicago has autocratic sway over the administration of the city. At least as early as the days of Richard J. Daley (who ruled from the mid-1950s to mid-1970s), the mayor selects the city council

committee chairs and controls assignments. In the 1990s, the elected school board was dissolved and “mayoral control” was established, which paved the way for massive restructuring and privatization. These are just a few examples of mayoral power in running the city in the interest of big business.

After her election in 2019, Lightfoot, who is a former corporate attorney and political “cleaner” for the Chicago Police Department in the wake of the murder of Laquan McDonald and its official cover-up, sought to expand this power by removing an alderperson’s veto related to issues in their ward, a move she defended as a brake on corruption.

Aldermen affiliated with the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) released a statement on the measure calling for support for an amendment to the emergency powers measure, authored by United Working Families: “The mayor is asking the City Council to abdicate its oversight responsibility with no guarantee that emergency dollars will be appropriated through an equity lens. We must prioritize black Chicagoans who are 30 percent of our city’s population but 60 percent of our city’s COVID-19 deaths. We must prioritize our neighbors who are deciding between paying rent and putting food on the table. We must prioritize recovery for those who need it most during this crisis.”

Business interests seeking pandemic contracts and subcontracts are registering complaints that FEMA contract rules exclude first-time contractors with the city, which has a preferential contract goal to award 25 percent of non-construction contracts to “minority business enterprises” and five percent to “women business enterprises.” Some pandemic contract holders have agreed to subcontract to companies that meet these criteria.

The racial narrative promoted by DSA, much of the corporate media and Lightfoot herself, whose office is organizing Racial Equity Rapid Response virtual events on the south and west sides, is clearly aimed at blocking the emergence of a unified movement of the working class and protecting the flow of corporate profits.

Also on Wednesday, after the official swearing-in of new police Superintendent David O. Brown, around 70 police officers were ordered to leave north-side districts for a so-called “public health mission” in the west-side neighborhood of Garfield Park, to enforce social

distancing and prevent anyone not living in an area of just a few blocks from entering the neighborhood. This extraordinary and likely illegal show of force in a mostly working class black neighborhood included tactical teams, beat cars and sergeants. The purpose was to shock and intimidate, bringing 40 units with lights flashing and sirens blaring, to disperse people who were committing no infractions. The police then reportedly moved the party to the Humboldt Park neighborhood.

Under the guise of emergency management, which is without doubt needed to respond to the catastrophic social conditions created by the pandemic, many governments around the world are consolidating unprecedented political and economic power within their executives.

As in Chicago, those assuming power are the same officials that had no pandemic preparedness, slashed spending and gutted medical and social infrastructure in relentless pursuit of profit. Their newly awarded privileges and capacities will be used to serve the interests of big business.

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