

“Teachers were crucified as a step in the destruction of public education”

## Richmond, California, teachers union pushes through concessions contract

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19 December 2009

On December 14, teachers in California’s West Contra Costa Unified School District (WCCUSD) narrowly passed a contract that includes a pay freeze, larger class sizes and a sharp cut in health care benefits.

The WCCUSD includes several cities in the San Francisco Bay Area of California, including Richmond, Hercules, Pinole, El Cerrito, San Pablo and parts of El Sobrante and Kensington. The district had insisted on concessions to help close a deficit of about \$16 million.

Accompanied by charges of irregularities, the 423-415 vote came after 18 months of discussions in which teachers continued to work without a contract. There is broad opposition to the concessions, which will hurt teachers and students alike.

In August, teachers voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike, which the union—the United Teachers of Richmond (UTR), an affiliate of the California Teachers Association (CTA)—never called. In November, teachers rejected a very similar contract by a vote of 701-671. That “No” vote was only affirmed after the union acceded to teachers’ demands for a recount.

Only a month later, the UTR leadership returned with a new agreement, and the contract vote was called on extremely short notice. The contract was pushed through in part due to a significant decline in the number of teachers voting. The 423 teachers who voted yes amount to less than one quarter of the membership.

Among the most punishing cuts for teachers is the elimination of fully paid health benefits for workers and retirees. Teachers retiring before July 2010 will still get full health care benefits. This provision is intended to push out more-experienced, higher-paid teachers, allowing the school district to bring in younger teachers at lower pay and fewer benefits.

For new teachers and those who do not retire by 2010, employer contribution to health care will be capped, forcing teachers to pay more out of pocket. This will set the stage for further reductions in benefits over the coming years. The younger teachers will also be left with a substantially higher

workload.

Class sizes will be increased, allowing for a “maximum class size average” of 38 students for most major subjects in grades 6 through 12. In lower grades, the maximum class size will be raised as well, including to 31 students (from the current 20) for kindergarten through third grade and 33 students for fourth and fifth grades. These class sizes are far too high for adequate instruction and attention to each student.

The contract also includes a wage freeze, along with the elimination of five paydays per year—amounting to a 2.5 percent pay cut.

As is happening to workers throughout the country, the economic crisis is being used by California’s corporate and political establishment, backed by the media, as an opportunity to reduce wages.

The *Oakland Tribune*, in an editorial supporting the contract, declared, “Fortunately for the district, the cuts come at a time when many teachers are looking for work [due to layoffs statewide]. Consequently, despite the wage and benefit reductions, district officials will have an opportunity to bring in new talent.”

Steve Greaves, a preschool teacher in an elementary school in Richmond, told the WSWS that the contract is “a real violation of the rights of our students. To have a maximum average of 38 students in a class, that means that you can have 60 students in one class and 16 in another, as long as it all works out to an average of 38.

“These large class sizes mean that teaching becomes a problem of behavior management rather than an academic setting for cooperative study.”

“We have taken lower salaries than many teachers in the state in order to have full health benefits,” Greaves added. “The union leadership basically sold us out and betrayed that tradition.”

“Teachers were crucified as a step in the destruction of public education,” commented Eduardo Martinez, a sixth grade teacher at Sheldon Elementary in Richmond.

As with so many districts, the schools in the Richmond area have been underfunded for years. "With the fiscal problems perpetuated by the state with their unwillingness to tax corporations, we have seen our supplies dwindle," Martinez said. "We have a very little supply of construction paper and not in the colors needed for projects. There is no pencil sharpener in my classroom; the students use their own paper and pencils. The ones without borrow from other students."

Greaves expressed the opposition many teachers feel to the role of the UTR leadership. "They shot-gunned this contract through, not letting anybody know until Saturday afternoon [two days before the vote] that there was a definitive agreement reached. A lot of people did not vote because they did not know about it or were not able to change plans on short notice."

Many teachers have complained about irregularities in the voting procedure. In addition to calling the vote on short notice, it was held at a distant location. Teachers were not asked to show IDs, and some have voiced concerns that it was possible to vote more than once. Despite the very close vote, the UTR has refused to have a recount.

Whatever the specifics of the vote, it is clear that the UTR and the CTA were determined to get the contract passed, accepting entirely the line of the district that there was no alternative to concessions.

UTR President Pixie Schickele said after the vote, "This was a very difficult bargaining session because of the state of the economy and the state of the district." A spokeswoman for the school board declared, "It's not the agreement we wanted to bring to the teachers. It's the best we could do under the circumstances."

In fact, these "circumstances" are the product of the policies pursued by the Democratic and Republican parties on a state and federal level, now led by the Obama administration. The treachery of the UTR and CTA is fundamentally a political question, bound up with its subordination to the Democratic Party, which controls the state legislature.

In the summer, the Democrats reached an agreement with Republican Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger to slash billions in state spending, including \$6 billion from K-12 education. This is now being translated into crippling cuts in school districts throughout the state.

Both parties have ruled out any tax increases on the wealthy or corporations to address the crisis. The \$16 million budget deficit for the WCCUSD is less than one-one-thousandth of the net wealth of the richest man in California, Lawrence Ellison (\$27 billion according to *Forbes*). Ellison owns a \$200 million palace across the San Francisco Bay in Woodside.

Responding to the claim that there is "no money" for maintaining teacher pay and benefits, Martinez, the middle school teacher, noted, "In a state that has one of the largest economies in the world, this assertion is ludicrous. In a district that houses [oil giant] Chevron, a corporation with record-breaking profits, this is shameful. There is no money because

our government is either too weak to do their job or they are in league with corporations to destroy public education. I would tend to believe the latter since much of educational policy is set under the guidance of the Business Roundtable, and the federal government's educational policy continues down the path of destroying public education."

Indeed, the attack on public education is now being overseen by the Obama administration, which is promoting right-wing measures such as charter schools, merit pay for teachers and increased testing. Meager federal stimulus dollars are being tied to the introduction of these measures in the administration's so-called "Race to the Top" program.

After handing out trillions of dollars to the banks, the Obama administration refused to bail out states facing budget deficits. The California budget crisis in the spring and summer was seen as a model by the administration, with Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner declaring that states would not get substantial financial aid but should instead "put in place reforms that will restore their creditworthiness."

The consequences of this policy are now being realized, and not just in California. Among the cuts in education now being implemented are: \$540 million in Michigan, \$300 million in Indiana, \$101.5 million in South Carolina, \$110 million from one school district in Maryland; \$43 million in Oklahoma.... The list goes on.

The combined budget deficit for all 50 states this year was about \$180 billion. While substantial, this sum pales in comparison to the bailout of the banks, as well as the \$636 billion military appropriations bill just passed by the House of Representatives.

The economic crisis, which has hit California particularly hard, is being used as an opportunity to sharply reduce funding on social programs and education, while driving down wages for workers across the board.

More cuts are likely, with California facing a projected \$20 billion shortfall next year. For its part, the Obama administration is preparing to make 2010 the year of "fiscal responsibility," in which further cuts to domestic programs and services will be a priority.



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