Unite the working class to defend public education!

Socialist Equality Party
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Teachers in Oakland are justifiably outraged by the decision of the school board to impose a no-raise contract, overwhelmingly rejected in January, which will also increase class sizes and pave the way for eliminating programs and laying-off dozens of teachers.

The unprecedented move by the school board must be rejected out of hand. It will mean a continued decline in the real wages of teachers, already among the lowest-paid in the region. Education for Oakland students will also be severely impacted.

At the same time, the proposal from the mediators—which the Oakland Education Association (OEA) union agreed could provide a "solid foundation" for resolving the dispute—is also outrageous. After noting that the cost of goods has increased 6 percent since 2007—the last year teachers received a raise—it went on to recommend that teachers get a paltry 2 percent raise…in 2012.

Teachers are determined to fight against this attack, but how can such a fight be carried out? It is first of all necessary to recognize that the situation confronting teachers in Oakland is not unique. This year, hundreds of thousands of teachers may be laid off, including 22,000 in California, 17,000 in Illinois, and 15,000 in New York. Teachers are being told that to keep their jobs, they must accept major concessions, including pay reductions, furloughs and cuts in benefits.

The attack on teachers is part of an attack on the public education system as a whole. School districts all across the country are responding to budget deficits by shutting down schools, eliminating programs, and privatizing services.

In Detroit, 54 more schools will be closed in the next two years. In Kansas City, the school district recently voted to close nearly half of its 61 schools, laying off 300 teachers. The list goes on and on. The impact on the education of students will be devastating.

To save our schools and communities, teachers, students, and the working class as a whole must organize and fight back. There is mass opposition to the attack on public education. On Tuesday, high school students throughout New Jersey staged a spontaneous one-day strike to oppose education cuts in that state.

What is needed is a program and perspective upon which this opposition can be based. The Socialist Equality Party calls for:

1. Stop all school closures, privatizations and budget cuts! End the victimization of teachers!

Billions must be expended to ensure quality public education for all student youth. Schools must be rebuilt and equipped with new supplies, textbooks, and technology. The SEP opposes the destruction of public education in favor of charter schools.

Teachers are engaged in a heroic effort to educate youth, confronting the impact of social decay and budget cutting. Often teachers are forced to pay out of pocket to give their students the most basic necessities. Teacher pay and benefits should be increased and all benefits restored. Thousands more teachers must be hired to reduce class sizes and workloads.

2. For a public works program to rebuild schools and provide quality jobs for all!

It is impossible for students to get a decent education when they are homeless and hungry. Official unemployment in California is 12.6 percent, while real unemployment is much higher. About one in five in Oakland lives in poverty. Nationwide, mass unemployment persists, and millions face the loss of their homes and the shutoff of basic utilities.

The fight to defend education must be linked up with the struggle to defend jobs and living standards of all working people. A massive public works program is required to guarantee good-paying jobs for all. There is no shortage of work to be done—including the rebuilding of our schools and communities.

3. Increase taxes on the rich! For the nationalization of the banks and major corporations!

The line from the corporate-controlled media and political establishment is that there is simply "no money" to provide teachers a decent wage and adequately fund public education. An editorial posted online by the *Oakland Tribune* on April 23 argued that it would be "irresponsible" to provide any raises to teachers.

For its part, the OEA is arguing that money must be found *within the district* to fund teacher pay, by cutting spending for administrative pay. While there is no doubt fat to be found in bloated salaries, the overall funding for education is entirely inadequate to meet the needs of teachers and students. The

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position of the OEA serves to obscure the real problem: the overall distribution of social resources.

There is plenty of money available to fully fund education. Thanks to the bailout of the financial system by the Obama administration, the top 29 hedge fund managers took home more than $25 billion in 2009. *That is, on average each of these individuals took home more than 25 times the entire budget deficit of the Oakland school district.*

To break the economic and political grip of the financial elite over society, the banks and major corporations must be nationalized and placed under the democratic control of working people. The enormous sums accumulated by a tiny layer must be reclaimed to meet pressing social needs, including education.

Form rank-and-file committees to unite the working class in defense of public education!

To fight for this program, workers must build new organizations of struggle. The role of the unions is to prevent any discussion of the social forces behind the attack on public education, isolate teachers in different districts from each other, and impose concessions.

In December, the district and the teachers union in Richmond pushed through a concessions contract over mass opposition, cutting benefits and significantly increasing class sizes. Just this week, a strike in San Juan Capistrano ended with the union agreeing to a 10 percent wage cut and a total of $19.9 million in concessions, which the union will attempt to sell to the membership as "temporary."

While teachers are looking to fight, the attitude of the OEA is very different. For them, the one-day strike called for today is intended to let off steam. It will do nothing to halt the attack on teachers.

The Socialist Equality Party calls for the formation of a rank-and file committee of teachers, independent of OEA, to organize opposition. An immediate appeal must be made to school staff, city workers, and all sections of the working class—who are themselves confronting an unrelenting attack on jobs and wages—for a unified fight. This should include preparations for a general strike throughout the country to defend public education.

Break with the Democrats and Republicans! For a socialist movement of the working class!

Fundamentally, the defense of public education is a political question, directed at the Democratic and Republican Parties. With his "race to the top" program, Obama is continuing the reactionary agenda of the bipartisan No Child Left Behind Act. Meager federal funds for education are conditioned on expanding charter schools, shutting down schools in the most distressed areas, and blaming teachers for the crisis of education.

In March, Obama publicly endorsed the mass firing of teachers in Central Falls, Rhode Island, giving a federal government stamp of approval to similar measures throughout the country.

Obama's policy on education is of piece with the overall agenda of the corporate elite, which controls both political parties. While many hoped the election of Obama would bring an end to Bush's policies, Obama has expanded war, handed trillions to the banks, and is now demanding cuts in Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid. In response to a massive jobs crisis, the Obama administration has done nothing to put people to work.

The attack on public education throughout the country is part of an international campaign to make the working class pay for the economic crisis—from Greece and Portugal, to Germany, Australia, and the United States. After guaranteeing the wealth of the rich, the call from the government and media is now for austerity and cost-cutting.

The satisfaction of the basic needs of the population, including education, immediately confronts the fact that every aspect of economic and political life is subordinated to the money-mad drive for personal wealth of a small minority, at the expense of the vast majority.

Public education is based on the fundamentally egalitarian principle that *everyone* should have access to quality education. As such, it is incompatible with an economic system whose fundamental premise is *inequality*.

The defense of education is therefore bound up with the socialist transformation of economic life. The forces of production must be publicly owned and democratically controlled, in the interest of social need, not private profit.

The Socialist Equality Party encourages all teachers and workers throughout the Oakland area to study our program and perspective, read the *World Socialist Web Site*, and make the decision to join the Socialist Equality Party.

To contact or join the SEP, click here.

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