

Oakland, California teachers participate in one-day strike

The a WSWS reporting team
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A rally of close to 2,000 students, teachers and parents was held at Ogawa Plaza in downtown Oakland on Thursday during a one-day strike of teachers in the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD).

The strike was called after the Oakland Board of Education ceased labor negotiations and imposed a no-raise contract on teachers—an action that is unprecedented in the history of the city’s public school system.

In order to address the budget crisis, the school district is demanding a freeze on teachers’ wages, an increase in class sizes, the closure of schools and programs, cutbacks in early childhood and adult education, and the layoff of dozens of teachers.

The broad participation of teachers, students, and residents reflected the growing opposition in the working class to the attack on public education. Nearly all the schools were effectively shut down during the day: 89 schools reported 91 percent participation of teachers in the strike. At 36 schools, not a single student attended class. The district had hired 300 one-day “replacement teachers” at \$300 for the day—triple the normal pay of substitute teachers—in an attempt to keep the schools open.

From the standpoint of the trade union, however, the strike served to let off steam as they discuss with the school board the imposition of concessions on teachers. At the rally, union leaders announced that the district had agreed to return to negotiations, after trying to impose a contract after nearly two years of failed negotiations. The resumed negotiations will likely start from a mediator’s recommendation—previously endorsed by the union—that includes a wage freeze next year and a paltry 2 percent raise the year after.

A WSWS reporting team passed out the SEP’s call for teachers to form independent rank-and-file

committees and fight to unite the entire working class to defend public education. (See, “Unite the working class to defend public education!”)

The WSWS interviewed several of those in attendance. Oakland resident Patricia Sykes was at the protest with her neighbor’s children, Chanel, Brie and Christian. “I am so positive about public education,” she said. “They made cuts in the 1960s, but this is different. The fate of our children is at stake. Public education is so vital to our society. What are they trying to do?”

“These are tough times,” Patricia noted. “We’re in real estate in Montclair. It’s been a tough year. We need to give the kids some hope. These are my neighbor’s kids; they go to Oakland public schools. I’m the babysitter today. I support the teachers completely.”

A teacher with seven years experience in the Oakland public school system told the WSWS: “I’m here because the school board needs to recruit and keep quality teachers. They need to cut the contractors and private consultants.”

“Governments don’t want to put money in classrooms,” the teacher added. “It’s a luxury item as far as they’re concerned. Whenever there’s a budget crisis they take it out of the classroom. It’s the easiest place to take money.”

The Oakland Unified School District became insolvent in 2003, requiring a bailout and takeover by the state. This was followed by massive cuts in teacher pay. As a result, Oakland teachers are some of the lowest paid in Alameda County, with starting salaries of about \$39,000 and an average of \$55,000.

Oakland’s superintendent of schools claims that it will still be necessary cut at least \$85 million from this year’s district’s budget (about a quarter of the total).

OUSD and the teachers' union, the Oakland Education Association (OEA), had been in negotiations for 18 months before reaching the impasse. In response, a fact-finding panel was set up to mediate the dispute. The recommendations of the panel, which included a paltry two percent raise for teachers in 2012, were rejected by the district as too expensive.

The findings of the panel shed light on the dire condition of public education in Oakland. (The full report can be read [here](#).)

OUSD is one of the largest urban school districts in California, home to 110 K-12 schools, about 2500 teachers and 38,000 students. The vast majority of the students face dire economic challenges.

The school district faces chronic declining enrollment and revenue, high turnover rates for new teachers, difficulty retaining quality teachers, and competition for funds from charter schools.

Throughout the rally, the anger and the determination of the teachers, students and parents to fight for public education was on clear display.

However, the trade unions continued to promote the idea that meaningful social change can be achieved by pressuring the Democratic Party. They sought to appeal to Democratic politicians such as Oakland Mayor Ron Dellums and US Representative Barbara Lee, both of whom were conspicuously absent from the rally.

Several speakers referred to the bankruptcy of Arne Duncan's "Race to the Top" and his drive for charter schools and privatization of education. These are, however, the official policies of the Obama administration, which went unmentioned.

The teachers union, for its part, has questioned the dire financial projections for the district made by the OUSD, arguing in a flyer for the strike that the crisis is simply a local "matter of priorities":

"We know that we are in a recession and that times are tough—yet teachers have not received any significant raises or Cost of Living Adjustments in years; meanwhile, the district's budget has ballooned, spending millions for standardized tests, outside consultants and additional administrators. We maintain that the district has money – that it is a matter of priorities [emphasis in original]."

By limiting the discussion of budget priorities to the level of the school district, the union is simply diverting

attention to the chronic underfunding of education at a state and national level—and the role of the Obama administration in starving schools of funding after handing out trillions of dollars to the banks.



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