

# San Diego teachers union facilitates the layoff of 1,500 educators

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25 March 2017

Last week, the San Diego Education Association (SDEA), held a series of layoff meetings at the end of the workday for the 1,500 pre-kindergarten to 12th grade educators who have been issued pink slip layoff notices by the San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) for the 2017-2018 academic year.

In February, following hours of pleas and testimonies from employees, students and community members, the SDUSD Board of Trustees voted 5-0 to proceed with the layoffs, justified by the need to cover a \$124 million budget deficit. Following the vote, the board told the devastated attendees it was their “fiduciary responsibility” to balance the budget.

The focus of the SDEA layoff information meetings was, in the words of union officials, to “make sure that everyone is being laid off properly.” In addition to educators, the layoffs include counselors, library clerks, custodians, art instructors, food service workers and occupational therapy specialists. Since 2008, nearly \$8.1 billion in funding has been slashed from California’s public education and community colleges, and another \$2 billion from its higher education institutions.

Offering no significant challenge, the SDEA presents the layoffs as an acceptable action undertaken during “budgetary crises,” so long as they are “legal” and carried out according to the contract parameters. The union made no pretense of appealing to teachers and other sections of workers throughout the state and beyond to oppose the layoffs, let alone rallying the 7,000 members who run the second largest school district in the state of California.

In fact, the sole focus of SDEA’s response is the preparations for a court hearing in early April to challenge the factual correctness of the district’s layoff lists on an individual basis. They echoed the SDUSD in

support of the call for older teachers to take early retirement incentives to ensure there are fewer layoffs.

Nearly three-quarters of the informational meeting was dedicated to discussing the upcoming court hearing. The beginning and end of the “fight” against the layoffs is to poke holes in the administered list of layoffs in order to provide false hope that individuals can possibly retain their positions.

The union officials also sowed illusions that California Governor Jerry Brown’s finalized budget expected in May would help, despite the fact that SDUSD interim president, CFO Patricia Koch made clear to the board that “even if the May revise restores the entirety of what was lost in January, we are still facing more than \$100 million in reductions in ‘17-‘18. So, the May revise is not the place to look for eliminating our problem. It may help, but we will still need to make reductions.”

The SDEA called on attendees to verify their seniority dates, their credentials on file, and even suggested that they inquire about the reasons why some colleagues at their level did not make the cut. Encouraging a bureaucratic process known as “bumping,” they suggested that educators argue that some who did not receive pink slips should have; this is the fight for “fairness” presented by union officials.

The remainder of the meeting was spent on reviewing the ways in which teachers will be forced to compete over some of the positions that are expected to be recalled. The practice of “tie-breaking,” agreed to by the district and the SDEA, assigns scores to teachers based on the test performances of the schools they are from, their language skills (on file), the number of their credentials, and degrees.

If a position opens up, all the laid-off workers will compete for the position using the “tie-breaking” score

assigned to them by the district. If the score is tied, the last four digits of their Social security numbers are added up to determine employment. This last demeaning act reveals the arbitrary and degrading nature of the entire layoff process, pitting workers against each other in a scramble for their jobs.

A 7th grade teacher expressed her objections, recalling her own terrible experience of “tie-breaking,” making the point that she had only “won,” after she and a colleague were literally forced to draw straws for their jobs. Mandated in the teacher’s contract, the “lottery must be conducted in the presence of at least two association (union) representatives.”

While the SDEA officials held the informational meetings in order to smother any opposition to the layoffs, many teachers attended the meetings in search of a genuine fight to protect their jobs and the wellbeing of their students.

Angie, a second grade teacher, has been teaching for 7 years. “This is the fourth time I’ve received a pink slip, but I don’t think I’ve ever been so angry. This is ridiculous and unnecessary. I haven’t told my students yet—it would kill them—but some of my parents found out. They feel like they have no voice. I am so disappointed in our country. With [Secretary of Education Betsy] DeVos it’s clear they aren’t actually interested in education. We are the second-largest district in the state and we keep getting less and less money.”

Chelsea, a teacher with eight years’ experience, just received her 5th pink slip. “What I’m going through is the new normal. I’m 30; I don’t expect to be safe or financially secure until I’m 40. At what point will they allow incoming teachers to have a life outside of the classroom? How are you supposed to get married, have kids or buy a house? I live paycheck to paycheck, have 3 different jobs and have to work a summer job. Many new teachers that have been teaching for 1-4 years can’t make rent and move back in with their parents.”

“It’s ridiculous, we are supposed to be educating for the future generation. My 5th grade students are already politically aware of what is going on. They know the government doesn’t care about them. They want to be scientists and are interested in learning but they are seeing cuts to all these programs and it is having a devastating impact on their self-esteem.”

Commenting that the layoff was part of a broader

attack on the working class, Chelsea noted that “San Diego isn’t the problem; this is one of the biggest districts in the state. The whole reason for the cuts is the budget coming from Sacramento.

“Betsy DeVos is someone who doesn’t believe in public education. They are putting people into office who want that department to be eliminated. We are already seeing people start to stand up. People are going to town hall meetings and they are angry. Government officials are scared to show up because they don’t know how to contain the anger.

“The Women’s March brought thousands of people into the streets. We should have a California statewide teachers’ strike.”

*The author recommends:*

San Diego Unified School District to cut at least 1,500 jobs  
[6 March 2017]



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