

San Diego, California school district pushes forward with layoffs and cuts

Norisa Diaz, Toby Reese
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Over the past several weeks, 1,500 educators and support staff in the San Diego Unified School District have been finishing out the school year with apprehension as they may not come back to their job next fall. In March of this year, 952 teachers and 600 support staff, including counselors, janitors, and librarians, received “pink slips” based on potential funding cuts announced by the district to close a reported budget deficit of \$124.4 million.

According to the contract agreement negotiated with the teachers union, San Diego Education Association (SDEA), the district was required to notify teachers by March 15 of their intent to issue a layoff notice. Over the past two months, the district and SDEA have been conducting a series of layoff informational sessions, town hall meetings with district board members, and interjections at San Diego Unified District board meetings.

On the one hand, SDEA leaders have presented themselves as the defenders of public education by ostensibly haranguing district officials for the layoffs and demanding the rescinding of the layoff notices to teachers. On the other, officials of the district lament—whether genuinely or obtusely—that everything possible is being done to keep as many teachers as possible but that the budget must be balanced.

Especially since the economic crisis of 2008, this process has invoked in educators across the country an almost perennial state of *déjà vu*—many teachers and staff members have received pink slips year after year and have been forced to pick up and look for new positions or leave the profession altogether.

Members of the Socialist Equality Party intervened at all the three town hall events sponsored by the SDEA in conjunction with the San Diego Unified School Board.

Each meeting was attended by one or two of the five school board members and was presented as a democratic platform in which teachers and other workers were to “speak truth to power.” In reality these town hall stunts, in which genuinely frustrated and devastated teachers, students and parents have expressed genuine anguish, have been planned as a means of letting off steam and preventing a broader political struggle in opposition to all cuts.

Over the three days families and supporters packed the union

hall at the end of the work day.

The union vetted all comments and encouraged pink-slipped employees to speak of their own personal stories which they ensured would end in one or another question prepared by the union in advance, including “Will you commit to rescinding the layoff notices?”

Board members answered with a roundabout “Yes”, that this was dependent on the number of workers who accepted the an early retirement “incentive” as well as better figures from California Governor Jerry Brown’s May budget revise for the 2017-2018 academic year.

The SDEA framed the town hall events as a genuine means to “hold the board members accountable” if they wished to be re-elected. This “accountability” is nothing more than empty jargon and amounts to acceptance of major cuts. The SDEA continued to ask the board “Why had you not involved us [SDEA] in the process?” This is code for demanding that the union be consulted in the layoff decisions and process.

Both SDEA and the district have kept the discussion within the confines of the “scarcity” of jobs due to a limited amount of resources.

While the layoff notices issued in March were based on an initial projected budget the May budget revise will confirm state funding allocated to countries throughout the state. The SDEA and School Board have treated the budget revise as a potential saving grace, instilling false hope in educators that the new figures could mean a drastic revocation of pink slips.

The reality, however, is that the difference from the projected budget for the 2017-2018 year is a mere \$1.5 billion increase in general funds to Democratic Governor Jerry Brown’s initial \$124 billion January proposal. Brown cited “ongoing pressures from Washington and an economic recovery that won’t last forever” as the reasons for needed budget cuts. Brown predicted the end of the ‘economic recovery’ and while speaking on the budget revise stated, “Make no doubt about it, cuts are coming in the next few years, and they’ll be big”.

A paltry \$1.2 billion will be added to K-12 funding throughout the state, which will do little to close the \$124 million deficit cited by the San Diego Unified District as the justification for the layoffs. Indeed, back in March superintendent Cindy Marten had pledged that “977 positions

must go regardless of what Brown does.” Despite the SDEA’s promise to wage a fight to save teachers, it is clear that all players were aware that layoffs have remained the basis by which the district planned to close the shortfall.

The SDEA made every effort to narrow the scope of comments at each event to prevent it from spreading to a broader conversation about the fact that this inadequate budget was handed down by the Democratic controlled California State legislature. No mention was made of the nationwide attacks on public education, the role of the unions in ensuring all layoffs were “legal” and performed according to their contract stipulations, or the union’s ties to the National Education Association (NEA) which beholden to the Democratic Party.

While the union and school board have both postured as defenders of public education at the numerous town hall and board meetings it must be said that there is no mention from either party of the elimination of over 977 positions, regardless of how many pink slips are rescinded.

Instead, the district and union officials have chosen to restrict the discussion to the Supplementary Early Retirement Plan (SERP), or “Golden Handshake” in which a retirement incentive—equal to 100 percent of their final salary spread out over 5 years—is given to teachers to force them into retirement.

The union and district have presented the SERP as a solution—spearheaded by SDEA—that will supposedly to create an open position with each teacher who accepts early retirement, all while pitting young against old, and fundamentally accepting austerity and cuts in positions. Older teachers are to be guilted into retirement while being told they are saving the jobs of younger teachers.

The school board, union, and local media have boasted that the 485 teachers who accepted the SERP are “saving” teachers’ jobs. The reality is, the SERP still ensures a deficit of educators. Even if employees are rehired one-for-one for every teacher who accepts the early retirement, a pink-slipped position has still been eradicated, leaving fewer teachers and staff overall and no mention is made of the compounded impact on the students, staff, and the community from these cuts.

District spokeswoman Shari Winet recently confirmed that not all retiree positions will be filled. “Costs of the program will be offset by leaving non-teaching positions open,” Winet wrote in an email. She made the point that the district gains to benefit from the retirements, the district “is in the middle of a major effort to modernize its workforce,” including, “pay hikes to hire and retain the best workers; retirements – more than 1,100 people headed for the doors; layoffs are required to right size the enterprise.” Replacing better paid older workers with a “younger, savvy workforce,” is another means by which workloads are increased for lower paid incoming teachers.

It is still unclear which of the classified retirements, (non-teacher positions), that include 177 office-technicians, 171 operational support employees (transportation, custodians,

maintenance, food workers, and others), 84 administrators, 149 paraeducators (noon duty workers, special needs assistants, child development center workers) and 7 school police employees, will be replaced.

One educator told WSWs reporters, “I have been teaching for 27 years. I cannot afford to retire and I do not want to retire, but have felt pressure from younger teachers to do so. They say ‘We have young families, your kids are grown up, why not retire so that I can support my family?’”

Another teacher remarked that the SERP was in no way an “incentive,” telling WSWs reporters, “The SERP is a bad deal. I can retire, but it is not enough to live on.”

Belinda expressed overwhelming agreement with the need to combine the struggles of working people everywhere adding, “What workers are facing affects all of us, all ages and all races. If we all banded together they would say it is illegal to congregate. You know they are using racism to keep us at each other’s throats. It’s called divide and conquer. Who is saying that race is fundamental issue, the rich ones!”

“They have us caught up in all these wars, but do you know how much money they make from these? The rich want us to have someone to hate so that we don’t get together and think about how bad things are here. And it’s going to get even worse.”

James, a veteran second grade teacher of 19 years second grade originally from Chicago, spoke out against the wars and the myth that there is no money in the wealthiest country in the world. “They just dropped the MOAB, all those bombs could easily pay for this deficit” he stated, “We are in a desperate situation and there’s no light at the end of the tunnel.”

There is palpable anger among students and parents who have spoken out against the attacks on their teachers and their education more broadly.

Last week students of Lincoln High School walked out of class demanding that the district hire a principal for their school—a position that has not been filled for nearly a year. Both middle and high school students have spoken out in anger at the town hall meetings about the looming cuts and in support of their teachers.



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