

Oakland, California board of education approves mid-year budget cuts despite growing opposition

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In the face of hundreds of protesters denouncing cuts to public education, the Oakland, California Board of Education voted 6-1 Wednesday to approve \$9 million in mid-year budget cuts from the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD), which serves 50,119 students. The cuts include \$4.8 million from the central office budget and \$4.2 million directly from the 87 district-run public schools (excluding 35 district-authorized charter schools), largely through staff layoffs, frozen positions and reduced supplies.

Roughly 500 students, teachers, staff, parents and other community members attended the meeting to protest the budget cuts. Within the working class of Oakland, there is a deep sentiment of opposition to further austerity, which found sharp expression in the public comments portion of the meeting. Dozens of speakers took to the microphone to denounce the board for their mismanagement of funds and efforts to curtail public education.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) intervened at the board meeting, distributing newsletters with our statement, “Build a committee to oppose Oakland school cuts! For a socialist program to expand public education!”

Warning that the board “is deliberately starving the public school system of resources so it can use the crisis it manufactured to close ‘failing schools’ and replace them with for-profit charter operations,” the SEP calls upon “school workers, parents, students and everyone else who opposes these cuts to form an emergency committee to defend the right to high-quality public education.”

Such a committee must be based on a rejection of the claim that there is no money for education, and fight for the complete political independence of the working class—from both the Democratic and Republican parties, as well as the various trade unions that are allied with the Democrats.

The statement concludes: “In order to carry out a genuine struggle in defense of public education, teachers, students, parents and all those opposed to these cuts should elect delegates to this fighting committee at their school sites and

in their neighborhoods. The aim of these committees is to unite the entire working class—black, white, Asian, Hispanic, young and old, employed and unemployed—in common battle to defend the right to public education.”

At Wednesday’s meeting, it quickly became clear that the board’s decision to make the cuts was predetermined. For the board members, the public comments portion of the meeting was simply meant to let those opposed to austerity vent steam. The school board members, above all President James Harris, repeatedly showed their contempt for the public during the meeting.

To begin with, the meeting started roughly 30 minutes after the scheduled start time. For a 5-minute time period just prior to the start of the meeting, static noise blared through the speakers, seemingly in an attempt to drown out protesters’ chants and demoralize oppositional sentiment.

The public comments portion of the meeting displayed the antidemocratic sentiments of the board members, as Harris repeatedly cut off speakers who went over the brief 1-minute time limit, especially anyone who was more critical toward the board. Harris appeared to be toying with one teenage girl, whom he first cut off from speaking, and then implored to come back to finish her statement.

After first allowing students to comment, the floor was then opened to adults to speak out against the budget cuts. At this point, Harris turned to someone behind the board who made a throat-slitting motion, prompting Harris to visibly laugh.

Throughout the meeting, District 3 Representative Jumoke Hinton-Hodge was constantly using her phone, despite multiple speakers telling her she was being rude and to pay closer attention.

The comments made by attendees expressed the accumulated rage within the population toward unending austerity. An older teacher with decades of experience at OUSD stated, “Some things never change. Being puppets for [former superintendent] Antwan Wilson is no excuse for

what's happening now. You are following an anti-student agenda. I'm saying that you should open the books of this district. ... Anyone that votes for this budget should be replaced!"

Community member Mike Hutchinson commented, "We know that you are making a decision to cut money from our school sites because you haven't looked at any other options. You haven't looked at [selling district property at] 1000 Broadway, you haven't looked at getting our debt to the state forgiven, you haven't looked at cutting police services. You haven't looked at cutting contracts, especially to companies connected to the same people that funded your elections to the school board."

At this point Harris—who received \$225,000 in donations from pro-charter school groups in the 2016 school board elections—cut the microphone from Hutchinson, who had clearly touched a nerve. Hutchinson closed by shouting, "This community is not gonna buy your garbage anymore!"

An SEP representative, Ben McGrath, urged those in attendance to form an emergency committee to defend the right to high-quality public education. McGrath immediately turned his back to the school board and declared, "I'd like to begin by addressing these comments to the audience. I am not addressing the school board here, the reason being is that they have nothing progressive to offer. The only thing they have to offer is austerity and more austerity. The claim that there is no money in Oakland or California or the United States is a lie. In Oakland alone, the top 1 percent make 20 times more than the bottom 99 percent. There is money for the schools, there is no need for these cuts! There is no need for any of our students to suffer."

He continued, "Today I am speaking as a representative of the Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality. We are calling for workers in Oakland and around the country to break with the Democratic Party, to break with the Republican Party, and to form an independent party that fights for their interests." At this point, Harris interrupted McGrath after he'd gone eight seconds over the time limit, earlier than any other speaker was interrupted, saying, "Your time has expired."

McGrath then said, "We need to form an emergency committee of workers," at which point the microphone was turned off. He concluded his comments without a microphone, urging attendees to "contact the SEP, contact us after this meeting, and learn about how we can set up these committees in your neighborhoods, in your schools, in your workplaces."

McGrath's comments were warmly received by the audience, with attendees exclaiming, "That's right!" and "Yup!" in agreement with the points raised. During his speech, District 1 Representative Jody London stood up to

leave, prompting a crowd member to shout, "Sit down Jody! This is for you!"

The SEP is the only political force intervening in this struggle that opposes all forms of austerity and makes no appeals to the school board. Rather, we call for the formation of workplace and neighborhood committees entirely independent of the school board, both the Democrats and Republicans, and the corrupt trade unions that seek to negotiate with the powers-that-be.

At the board meeting Wednesday, Oakland Education Association (OEA) President Trish Gorham told news station CBS Local, "They do have to cut in order to make the \$1.2 million reserve, that's a legal requirement. And they probably have to add more for Special Ed funds and transportation, because we know those go over budget. We're talking about \$5 or \$6 million in all, not \$9 million."

In another interview after the 6-1 vote in favor of cuts, Gorham continued to cultivate illusions in the school board, saying, "Even though the vote has been taken, I expect them to continue to see how much they can reduce those cuts and not actually implement them."

The "radical" wing of the OEA, "Classroom Struggle," submitted a draft motion to the board prior to the meeting. In their speech before the board, they urged any board member to raise the motion in opposition, saying, "I am imploring you right now to, one of you be brave and put forward a motion to rescind your vote on November 8," and instead "make those \$1.2 million cuts from the top, central office employees who make more than \$150,000."



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