

Teachers must prepare for struggle when schools reopen

Oakland Education Association announces contract negotiation impasse

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Last month, the Oakland Education Association (OEA) declared an impasse in contract negotiations and told teachers to prepare for a strike when school resumes in August. The district is demanding an increase in special education class sizes and the hours all teachers work, without a commensurate rise in teacher pay.

Oakland teachers are increasingly outraged over the district's poor pay, immense turnover, large class sizes and dilapidated facilities. They are inspired by the wave of teachers struggles that broke out in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona and elsewhere against chronic underfunding of education, and are looking for a way to fight.

Teachers should not assume that just because the OEA has told them to prepare for a strike, that the union will actually call one. Once an impasse is declared the Public Employee Relations Board assigns a mediator. If mediation fails, a fact-finding panel is appointed, and after its results are made public the union can legally strike and the district can legally impose its last contract offer.

The OEA has consistently done everything in its power to prevent a struggle. Despite the major concessions demanded by the district, the union has dragged out negotiations for 18 months, leaving Oakland teachers to work the entire 2017-18 school year without a contract. The OEA has enforced decades of concessions, including \$9 million in budget cuts in the middle of this school year. Far from fighting these cuts, OEA President Trish Gorham said, "They do have to cut in order to make the \$1.2 million reserve, that's a legal requirement...But that's \$5 or \$6 million, not \$9 million."

Any organization that accepts budget cuts as necessary while the government spends trillions on wars and corporate tax cuts is incapable of defending public education. Public education in California and across the country is under bipartisan attack. Any serious struggle immediately involves a political fight against both Democrats and Republicans and the powerful corporate interests they both defend.

The union bureaucracy, however, is entirely integrated into the Democratic Party machine. Both the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) are major cogs in this corporate-controlled party, with AFT President Randi Weingarten serving as a member of the Democratic National Committee.

To prevent teachers from waging a political fight against the Democrats, who have attacked public education just as savagely as the Republicans, the NEA and AFT have isolated educators and worn down their resistance against decades of budget cutting by both parties.

To defend public education and win gains for teachers and students, Oakland teachers must take the conduct of this struggle out of the hands of the unions by forming their own, independent rank-and-file committees. These committees should establish direct connections with educators in Los Angeles, San Diego and nearby Fremont whose contracts are also expired or expiring and prepare joint strike action.

In an effort to paint themselves in militant colors, OEA officials are holding a meeting Saturday, titled, "Lessons from The Red State Teacher Rebellion: What Can California Learn?" In the description of the meeting, the OEA officials present the strikes, which were initiated by rank-and-file educators independently of the unions, as great victories for the teacher unions, which supposedly "won unprecedented gains."

It is no accident these struggles erupted in states where the NEA, AFT and their state affiliates had the weakest hold over teachers. Educators used social media to circumvent the unions, which were more than willing to accept rotten deals with Republican governors and state legislators.

In West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona, teachers essentially launched wildcat strikes and then initially defied back-to-work orders by the unions. However, without any genuinely independent rank-and-file committees, the unions were able to reestablish control, end the strikes and sign sellout deals that ignored teachers' main demands. The

insulting pay and spending increases they got will be funded through regressive taxes, cuts in other essential services and increases in health care and pension contributions.

Speakers at today's event include Rebecca Garelli, a leader of Arizona Educators United (AEU), which played a key role in the betrayal of the Arizona strike. The AEU, which functioned as a front group for the Arizona Education Association, called off the strike and presented Republican Governor Doug Ducey's funding plan as a great victory, despite teachers explicitly rejecting this plan from the beginning.

Throughout the strike, the AEU and AEA did everything to prevent Arizona teachers from linking up with striking teachers in Colorado (controlled by the Democratic Party) and other states. Instead they limited teachers to impotent appeals to Republican legislators for increased funding. When the legislature predictably rejected the teachers' demands, the AEU insisted the strike be called off, saying the Governor's plan was "the best we could get." When this provoked rank-and-file opposition, the AEU deleted critical comments by Arizona teachers on their Facebook page.

By demobilizing the teachers, the unions have given the Trump administration a free hand to escalate its assault on public education, with threats by the president's billionaire education secretary, Betsy DeVos, to push school vouchers for private and parochial schools and back Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids in schools.

Nothing has been resolved in any of these states and after the summer break a new wave of struggles will reemerge. That is why the real lessons of this year's teachers strikes must be absorbed. What are they?

1. Teachers must break the stranglehold of the corporatist trade unions, which do not unite educators but divide them. Oakland teachers should use the summer months to build new organizations of struggle, rank-and-file committees based in every school and neighborhood, to prepare strike action when schools reopen. The isolation of this struggle by the OEA must be broken by reaching out to other California districts and throughout the US to prepare a statewide and nationwide strike to defend public education.

2. Teachers must reject the subordination of their struggle to the union's maneuvers with the Democratic Party. Democrats like Governor Jerry Brown who run states like California, Colorado and New York, just like President Obama before them, back corporate-driven "school reform" schemes. Instead of bowing before the two big business parties and what they claim is affordable, teachers must fight to mobilize every section of the working class in common struggle for the social right to living wages and high quality public education.

3. Teachers must reject the lie that there is no money

for raises and funding education. Both parties squander trillions of dollars on corporate tax cuts, criminal wars and other measures that benefit the rich. While public education is starved, just three billionaires—Jeff Bezos, Warren Buffett and Bill Gates—have more wealth than the bottom 160 million Americans. It is not possible to fund education or any other essential need without a frontal assault on the personal fortunes of the corporate and financial oligarchy.

4. The fight for high quality education and other social rights is above all a political fight. If the needs of society are to take precedence, then the working class, the vast majority of the population, must fight to take political power in its own hands and put an end to the dictatorship of the banks and big business. This means uniting every struggle—against inequality, attacks on immigrants, war and the threat of dictatorship—into a single political struggle for a workers' government and the socialist reorganization of society. This includes the transformation of Wall Street banks and major corporations into public enterprises, collectively owned and democratically controlled by working people.

There is growing support among workers and young people for a socialist alternative. In the recent midterm elections, the Socialist Equality Party's state legislature candidates—David Moore and Kevin Mitchell—won over 15,000 votes. This takes place amid a rising tide of working class struggles, particularly by educators, in the US, Mexico and around the world.

The SEP will do everything to help Oakland teachers set up rank-and-file committees and link up with teachers and other workers throughout the country to build a powerful political movement to defend public education. We urge teachers to contact the SEP to begin this fight.



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