

“Our action is part of a broader fight for education”

Teachers in Oakland, California speak out at wildcat demonstrations

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In an act of defiance, teachers at several schools in Oakland, California participated in wildcat “sickouts” and demonstrations Monday to demand pay raises, smaller class sizes, and better school conditions. The job action by at least 150 teachers and staff was initiated independently of the local union and against threats of retribution by the school district. The coordinated action involved educators calling in sick or taking a personal day off.

The sickouts were called by small groups of teachers at Oakland High School who were frustrated with the long-stalled negotiations between the Oakland Education Association (OEA) and Oakland Unified School District (OUSD). The unions have kept teachers on the job without a new contract since July 2017 even as conditions for educators and students alike have gotten worse.

Teachers in Oakland face dire conditions similar to teachers across the United States, with stagnant pay alongside soaring living costs, overcrowded classes, understaffing, high turnover rates among teachers, and routine violations of special education service requirements.

The state and school district officials are now demanding up to \$60 million in budget cuts over the next two years. OUSD Superintendent Kyla Johnson-Trammell proposed to meet that mark by closing or merging 23 out of 76 OUSD schools, replacing public schools with charter schools, and removing up to 340 school positions. After decades of cuts to social spending and growing inequality, the government is preparing to starve teachers, students and their families of basic educational resources.

Teachers joined Monday’s actions from Oakland High School, Fremont High School, Madison Park Academy, Oakland Technical High School, and Castlemont High School. After picketing in the morning at each of these locations, participants congregated for an afternoon rally at Oscar Grant Plaza in the center of the city. They were joined by dozens of students and staff, reaching a total crowd of over 200 people.

The demonstration signified the radicalization taking place among broad layers of the working class and youth. More than 30,000 teachers in Los Angeles, the nation’s second-largest school district, are threatening to strike next month after the union has kept them on the job without a new contract for more than a year.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site*, joined by members of the Socialist Equality Party’s youth movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), spoke with attendees about the situation in Oakland.

Many teachers expressed support for the SEP’s fight to unify teachers across California, the country and the world to defend the right to public education, a task that requires the building of rank-and-file committees independent of the unions and corporate-controlled political parties.

Karoline, a Chemistry teacher in her third year, said she was “sick and tired of years of endless budget cuts, especially in a city like Oakland where the cost of living is so high.” Dani, her colleague who teaches English, said teachers were “outraged” not just about low pay but also “the support our students aren’t getting. Class sizes are too high, we cannot teach in this environment.” Both Dani and Karoline said they had followed and supported the nationwide wave of teacher struggles earlier this year, which began with the statewide walkout of West Virginia educators. Teachers, they both agreed, should be united in a single struggle.

Kehinde from Fremont High School explained to WSWS reporters why she joined the sickouts: “This is our second year without a contract. Oakland High planned the sickout and we only heard about it Thursday but knew we had to join.”

She went on to describe the plight she has seen within the broader Oakland school district. “I’ve been working here [Fremont] for three years and before that I was at a corrupt charter school in the district. That charter would just take the

money for special education and pocket it without really providing the services.”

Steve, a Special Education teacher at Madison Park Academy, said, “The district spends an enormous amount on consultants. The latest was some firm from Texas that was hired to try and teach us to do the same work with fewer staff. At my school we’ve increased the number of Special Education teachers from two to five but haven’t increased the instructional aides to go with them, so you have a lot of teachers on their own.

“They just aren’t hiring enough people to actually provide all the services. The ones they do hire, they don’t pay them enough. We have an instructional support specialist who literally works three additional jobs.”

Median teacher pay for Oakland Unified School District is \$58,033, the lowest out of any district in California with over 20,000 students. This compares with an average median teacher salary of \$76,890 in comparably sized districts. While it would take an immediate 32 percent raise to bring the Oakland median up to the statewide average, the OEA is proposing a meager 12 percent increases over three years to counter the district’s proposal of five percent over three years.

Steve said the heavy burdens aren’t restricted to teachers and staff but affect students and their families as well. Nearly three-quarters of students in the district are on free and reduced lunches and their families cannot afford to provide full meals on a regular basis because they are hit with the same soaring rent costs and stagnant pay as teachers. “I did a survey in my biology class and not one student had eaten breakfast... How do you teach kids who are going hungry?”

Dozens of students joined their teachers at the demonstration, defying potential punishments from school officials. Largely from working-class communities from many different ethnic backgrounds, they expressed sympathy with their teachers and shared their outrage against conditions in public schools.

One group of students spoke to the crowd about the conditions they face in their classrooms. “We’ve had a long-term sub in math class for two years in a row,” one raised.

IYSSE members and WSWs reporters also spoke to a group of high school seniors who had come out to support their teachers. One Oakland High School student said, “Our teachers can’t afford living, and the turnover is so high, that we are not able to get the education we deserve. It’s not our teachers’ fault; it’s the system.”

After discussing a socialist strategy to build a unified struggle of teachers and workers to defend public education for all people, the students signed up to learn more about the IYSSE and attend meetings at the University of California,

Berkeley.

At one point, demonstrators confronted the district’s communications director John Sasaki as he spoke with the local press. He reiterated the threat contained in the public email sent by Superintendent Kyla Johnson-Trammell who said “A ‘sick-out’ is an illegal labor action. Teachers who call in sick under these circumstances will potentially be subject to disciplinary action and loss of pay.” Teachers denounced Sasaki and the district for their threats, after they imposed budget cuts and offered the insulting wage increase proposals.

David Byrd, an Oakland High School teacher, referred to the school board officials as “agents of exploitation,” looking to turn profits off of charter schools and classroom materials while cutting resources from classrooms and teachers. “We’re not failing; the central office is failing. You get this huge turnover and then they’re just throwing young Teach for America interns into the hardest classrooms as if that will solve the problem.”

He continued, “The OEA is taking out more than \$100 a month from our paychecks and then they’re throwing it at politicians like Gavin Newsom. This state is what it looks like to have Democrats running everything and we have more homeless people than anywhere. This school district is exactly how the Democrats have made it.”

Following the brave one-day demonstration launched by the teachers themselves, Oakland teachers must fight to mobilize teachers across the district and state in the fight to secure pay hikes and full funding for education. To carry out this struggle, Oakland teachers must build their own independent organizations, and reach out to their allies including teachers in Los Angeles, workers in other sectors, and families, not only across the district and state, but nationally and internationally as well.

Ruben from Oakland High School said, “We’re facing the same problems as they are in other school districts. It’s all connected. There’s a plan to privatize public education and they’re carrying it out across the country. Our action is not isolated but part of that broader fight.” He continued, “There is plenty of money to fund schools but it’s a matter of priorities. Any time they want to bomb a country, they find the money, but then they demand cuts to education.

“I’ve been following the protests in France. We need to fight like that here. We need to recognize that their struggle is our struggle.”



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