

Oakland, California teachers plan a one-day walkout Friday

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As more than 30,000 educators in Los Angeles continue their strike, Oakland, California teachers in nine middle and high schools have voted at school site meetings to hold a second one-day wildcat “sickout” strike. The walkout, organized independently of the union, is scheduled for Friday.

As of this writing, the schools that have voted to strike—Oakland Technical High School, United for Success Academy, Oakland High, Skyline High, Life Academy, Rudsdale, West Oakland Middle School, Fremont High and MetWest—account for roughly 20 percent of all students in the district, while other schools are expected to join as well.

The Oakland Education Association (OEA) has kept educators at work despite being without a contract for over 18 months and has refused to link up Oakland teachers with their counterparts in LA and the rest of the state.

Conditions in Oakland are driving teachers into struggle, just as they are in Los Angeles and around the US. Decades of budget cuts have produced dilapidated, understaffed schools where student learning has been drastically eroded. Oakland teachers have the lowest median salaries of any major district in the state, with high turnover rates and large proportions of uncertified teachers, in particular in Special Education which services the highest-needs students.

In the face of this immense crisis in public education, teachers and school workers are fed up with constant delays of the unions and the district’s deteriorating conditions. On December 10, teachers staged a one-day wildcat strike at three schools. Since that time, the sentiment for a broader struggle has grown. Teachers throughout the district are bitter at the role of the OEA in keeping them in the dark and isolated and have begun to take matters into their own hands.

The immediate concerns of Oakland teachers go far beyond the issues in contract negotiations. Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) has unveiled a plan to cut nearly \$60 million from the budget over the next two years and close or merge over 20 schools, roughly a third of the district’s total number of schools. The entire budget crisis is driven by the bipartisan efforts to open up public education funding to private profit through charter schools. A recent report entitled “Breaking Point” estimates that charter schools have siphoned off at least \$57 million each year from the Oakland public schools.

Oakland teachers, along with millions across the US and around the world, have closely followed developments in Los Angeles and desire a united, statewide struggle. Last Saturday, nearly 3,000 teachers and parents from several districts across the Bay Area marched in Oakland expressing their solidarity with Los Angeles teachers.

“I know that one of the reasons why Oakland is having to wait to strike is this idea of being ‘strike legal,’” said Susan Chiodo an elementary school teacher in Oakland, “and you can see that they’re purposely spreading it out.” She continued: “It’s a little frustrating, because a lot of us, at least my colleagues where I work, are saying we should be completely united with LA teachers as they go on strike, that it would make us stronger; they’re trying to divide and conquer, and we’re trying to get together.”

Teachers at the nearby Fremont Unified School District have been working without a contract this school year, following a one-year contract that included a derisory one-time, one percent pay raise. The district is currently offering a paltry 0.7 percent pay raise. Fremont teachers also mobilized a large contingent at the Oakland rally and emphasized the growing support

for strike action in their district. The local teachers union is presently confining teachers to toothless “work-to-rule” actions and has also blocked the sentiment for a statewide strike action together with Los Angeles teachers.

In sharp contrast to the teachers fighting to defend education, the OEA had the temerity to parade a series of official speakers at the Oakland rally who were, in fact, the same Democratic politicians responsible for pushing school privatization. State Senator Nancy Skinner was given a prominent spot to heap praise on the new Democratic Governor, Gavin Newsom. Skinner, as a representative in the state assembly, voted for the Budget Acts of 2008, 2009 and 2010 which collectively cut over \$20 billion from the state’s schools. The current education crisis in California is a direct result of her decision along with the rest of the Democratic state legislature which placed the burden of the 2008 economic crisis on California’s workers.

Another featured speaker was Alameda County Superintendent Karen Monroe who threatened Oakland Unified with state receivership if it does not make nearly \$60 million in cuts over the next two years. At an October school board meeting Monroe warned, “If we see that those budget balancing strategies are not being implemented, we will have to impose strategies.”

The courageous actions of Oakland teachers will find an enthusiastic response among educators across the state and nationally. It is now essential that teachers, nurses, aides and the rest of school workers form rank-and-file committees, independent of both parties of big business and the unions, to turn out to workers for support throughout the state and beyond, and take the struggle in defense of public education forward.



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