Oakland teachers hold second wildcat “sickout,” call for statewide strike with Los Angeles teachers

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In a demonstration of independent initiative and defiance of the state-sponsored contract negotiations process, hundreds of Oakland teachers conducted a one-day wildcat “sickout,” Friday. The majority of teachers at nine schools called in sick and picketed outside Oakland Technical High School, where students and community members joined them in solidarity.

The crowd of over 500 people marched two miles down Broadway Avenue and rallied outside Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) headquarters downtown, demanding full funding for education, a raise in teachers’ pay and the halting of all school closures.

The sickout is part of the growing international upsurge of the working class in 2019. It takes place as over 30,000 teachers are striking in Los Angeles, over 70,000 Mexican “maquiladora” workers are engaged in a wildcat strike in open defiance of their union, a general strike of 700,000 public sector workers is shaking Tunisia, and as the “Yellow Vest” protesters in France prepare for their tenth week of confrontations with the French police and state apparatus.

These struggles are a continuation and deepening of the militant struggles that took place in 2018, including the statewide wildcat strikes by teachers in West Virginia, Arizona, Oklahoma and other states in the US.

In almost every major struggle of the working class in the recent period, workers have organized themselves independently of the trade unions, which have served to repress the class struggle globally for decades. Oakland teachers have been working without a contract since July 2017 and have begun to take independent initiative themselves, with yesterday’s sickout more than tripling the number of schools and teachers participating over the last sickout in December.

The school district unsuccessfully sought to intimidate teachers to prevent the sickout, with two district officials sending a brief email Tuesday that labeled the action “illegal” 12 times. One portion reads, “any sickouts, walk-outs or strikes conducted during this time are illegal and employees are subject to consequences for participation.” The letter also threatens that teachers “will be subject to disciplinary action and will lose pay for time missed.”

In another official email sent Thursday evening, OUSD Superintendent Kyla Johnson-Trammell openly stated that any pay raises secured by teachers will be offset by budget cuts, including layoffs. She wrote, “Each one percent raise that teachers receive, equals an additional $1.9 million per year in costs to the District for their additional wages and benefits. When we add in all represented employees, such as support staff and others, the costs rise to about $3.5 million for each 1 percent raise.” Later, the email states, “to pay for increases for employee salaries, additional reductions in other areas will be necessary.”

The teachers’ union Oakland Education Association (OEA), the local affiliate of the California Teachers Association (CTA) and National Education Association (NEA), has confined itself to the most tepid demands in negotiations, including a 12 percent pay raise over three years and class size reductions of two students over two years. The district has proposed a five percent raise over three years, no class size reductions, and caseload increases for Special Education teachers.

After Alameda County Superintendent Karen Monroe demanded nearly $60 million in budget cuts over the next two years to prevent state receivership, and it was revealed that the School Board plans to close or merge roughly a third of OUSD school over the next five years, the union raised no demands to halt the school closures or budget cuts. Instead, Monroe was invited to speak at an OEA-sponsored rally last weekend, alongside state Democrat Nancy Skinner, who voted for austerity budgets that cut upwards of $20 billion from California public schools in 2008, 2009 and 2010.

Oakland teachers supporting the *World Socialist Web Site’s* call for independent rank-and-file committees distributed hundreds of copies of the recent WSWS *Teachers Newsletter* statement, “A fighting strategy for California teachers,” which was met with great interest by teachers at the rally.

Teachers, students and community members expressed complete agreement with the call for a statewide strike to carry forward the struggle both in Oakland and Los Angeles.

Tara, an OUSD teacher who was out with her daughter, said, “I’m here because I’m being priced out of Oakland, I can’t

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pay the ever-increasing rent, and I'm also here for our youth. We need reduced class sizes. These cuts effect our most marginalized youth."

Asked about the demand for a statewide strike, Tara declared, "I totally support it. It's a growing movement, not just statewide but nationwide. We need to wake up and be aware of the corporate spending and the billionaire and millionaire agenda behind this. They are packaging a product to sell now, and we have to fight back. We want to protect public education, and I support universal education and universal health care, which are human rights."

Dozens of students joined their teachers for the picket, march and rally. Oakland Technical High School senior Mahlet told the WSWS, "I'm here to support our teachers. A lot of our classes don't have textbooks and that's not fair. Our teachers deserve to get paid way more for all the work that they do outside of school. They should get paid enough to live where they work."

She commented, "Our priorities aren't right. All the money that we spend on incarceration, on each prisoner instead of each student, is a big issue."

In discussing the need to unify with LA teachers, Meka said, "I think a statewide strike is probably the best thing to do, to have all the teachers in the state stand in solidarity with each other. I think the OUSD School Board has a history of not really following what the teachers are asking for, so if everyone in California stands up together, they'll be more likely to pay attention." Mahlet added, "I think you'd see a ton of students standing with their teachers as well if that were to happen."

Also joining his teachers from MetWest High School was Ryan, who declared, "Regarding school closures, it will just make a bad situation worse and make the schools that stay open more overcrowded. Students whose schools close will either move to another school farther away or just drop out altogether. Wherever they go, there won't be enough resources to serve them."

His friend Donna, a student at Oakland High School, said, "Oakland and LA should team up to bring attention to our state. A statewide strike would show that we're serious."

Rachel, an Illustration teacher at Skyline High School with two years' experience in Oakland, declared, "The low wages, budget cuts and school closures in Oakland are absolute bullshit."

She strongly supported the call for a statewide strike, declaring, "I definitely support a statewide strike because these are statewide issues and we get a lot of our funding from the state. If we could all band together and fight collectively, then maybe we could actually get more state funding. We all know, obviously, that OUSD has a huge financial deficit, which is very real. So if the state actually provided the funding that the district needs, maybe they could fund our teachers and programs and get out of the deficit."

Many teachers spoke very critically of the attack under way against public education and the need for a broader movement of the working class to combat the drive towards privatization.

A teacher with the AmeriCorps program who wished to remain anonymous for fear of reprisal told the WSWS, "I'm a math teacher. When they say, 'There's no money' that's not true, and I'm happy to help them do the math." She continued, "If Trump is shutting down the government for $5.1 billion to fund the wall, the real shutdown should be for our schools and that money should be funding our schools. Instead they are funding prisons; how many more prisons have we opened up? They spend more on prisons then they do on students."

She noted, "This all has to do with capitalism and the way that we run our country. If the government wants to keep the divide between the rich and the poor, then they are doing a very good job of it."

David, a teacher at Life Academy with six years, criticized AFT President Randi Weingarten's tweet last week regarding the looming LA teachers strike, in which she wrote, "This is not about a strike wave—this is a specific fight for the kids & public schools of LA."

David declared, "I totally disagree with this being a local issue. There's no such thing as a local issue in this state or country. If we leave it to be local issues, then we'll continue to see Oakland teachers underfunded and undervalued, and LA teachers underfunded and undervalued, it's just going to be a problem that continues. Unless there's statewide action nothing will change. I would love to see a statewide strike, and I think we should absolutely have one."

David also commented on the need for a broader social struggle to secure the rights of the working class, saying, "We're all out here fighting for lower class sizes and higher pay for teachers, but the reality is that unless things change dramatically in how wealth is distributed—not just here in Oakland, but statewide, nationwide, and globally—then there will continue to be fights for the most basic needs and necessities."

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