

Oakland, California teachers overwhelmingly vote to strike

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The Oakland Education Association (OEA) announced Monday that its members voted by 95 percent to authorize a strike in polling conducted over the previous week. Teachers in the California Bay Area city have been kept on the job without a contract for over 20 months, during which their working conditions have continued to deteriorate. The unprecedented 84 percent turnout for the strike authorization vote is indicative of the educators' desire to join the struggle of teachers across the country against the decades-long assault on public education.

The union and school district are currently in the final "fact-finding" phase of contract negotiations, in which a three-person panel meets with each side and issues a non-binding report, which is expected to be delivered on February 15. If no settlement is reached by that point, the union is legally allowed to call a strike.

The past year has seen statewide strikes erupt in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona, along with a series of local strikes across Washington state and last month's week-long strike by 33,000 Los Angeles teachers. Educators across the country, most recently in Virginia and Colorado, have held protests to express their outrage over low wages, large class sizes, understaffing and privatization by means of charter schools.

Oakland teachers have the lowest median pay of any large school district in California. At the same time, Oakland teachers must deal with the growing social crisis in the city, which results in increasing numbers of hungry, impoverished and even homeless students in their classrooms. Meanwhile, they have to contend with ever fewer resources. These conditions have produced a 20 percent yearly turnover rate.

The district has responded by bringing in more new teachers who have emergency credentials and assigning them to impoverished schools without adequate support

staff. Fully a fifth of special education teachers in the district are not certified.

These crisis conditions are the outcome of bipartisan efforts to allow private interests to exploit the \$600 billion spent nationwide on public education to turn a profit. In California, Oakland has been the focal point of school privatization efforts since the district was placed in state receivership in 2003 under then-mayor and future governor Jerry Brown, a Democrat. Now a full 30 percent of the district's students are attending privately run charter schools.

The school board has sought to maintain a perpetual crisis in the district to justify shutting down more schools and opening up more charters.

The board has announced it plans to make up to \$60 million in cuts to the budget over the next two years. In order to achieve a "sustainable" budget, it will close up to a third of the district's schools over the next five years. This wrecking operation began last week with the nearly unanimous school board vote to close Roots International Academy, a middle school in an impoverished neighborhood in East Oakland.

In an email to teachers, school Superintendent Kyla Johnson-Trammell announced that for every one percent raise the teachers get above the district offer of 5 percent over three years, she will cut \$1.9 million from other parts of the budget, including staffing and services. It is no exaggeration to say that public schools in Oakland are facing an existential threat.

In order to defend public education, teachers must oppose the privatization plans being pushed by both big business parties. However, the OEA has insisted that Oakland teachers restrict themselves to local negotiations and support the same Democratic politicians who have been attacking education.

A union-organized "rally to defend public education"

included as featured speakers Alameda County Superintendent Karen Monroe and state senator Nancy Skinner, both of whom have sordid histories attacking teachers. In October, Monroe informed the school board that if it did not make massive cuts over the next two years, she would place the district under receivership and carry out the cuts herself. For her part, Skinner voted for over \$20 billion in cuts to California's schools when she was in the state Assembly.

While praising these charlatans, the OEA has insisted that Oakland's crisis is a local issue and the teacher retention crisis can be solved if only the school board negotiates fairly. The union has asked to include school closures in negotiations, but avoided any discussion of the planned budget cuts or the threat of state receivership at the hands of the Democratic politicians it endorses.

One young special education teacher told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "I think we all know this isn't going to be settled in contract negotiations. The union isn't asking for enough. Even if we get everything the union is asking, we're still underpaid and understaffed."

The OEA is only following the lead of the California Teachers Association (CTA) and the National Education Association (NEA) in lining up behind the same Democrats who are attacking public education. Despite being without a contract for as long as the Los Angeles teachers, the unions intentionally avoided a simultaneous strike. The OEA held a strike vote only after the LA teachers' union, United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA), had shut down that strike on the basis of a complete betrayal of the teachers' demands.

The LA sellout was hailed by the OEA as a "historic victory." The OEA Facebook page declared, "UTLA won, and they won big. Now it's our turn to rise up," while OEA President Keith Brown posed with UTLA President Alex Caputo-Pearl.

Many Oakland teachers are angered by the isolation the union is trying to maintain. During the LA teachers' strike, hundreds of Oakland teachers from nine schools held a one-day wildcat "sickout" strike to protest the stalled negotiations and the unrelenting assault on education. This action was organized independently of the union.

The sickout in January followed a similar sickout in December, but with more than triple the number of

schools and teachers participating. Further, it took place in defiance of open threats from the school district that teachers would face consequences. In a district-wide email sent days prior to the sickout, two district officials called any such action "illegal" 12 times and threatened that teachers "will be subject to disciplinary action and will lose pay for time missed."

This coming Friday, students from at least six high schools will engage in a student sickout. The students participating will rally at Oakland High School and march to the district headquarters downtown in solidarity with their teachers.

In a letter addressed to Oakland teachers, the group organizing the sickout, "Oakland Student Organizers," said its "primary goal is to establish students as a substantial force within the school district by reminding the central office that we both control their funding, and—through our parents—elect their bosses." It added, "We have the right to a quality public education, and we will fight for it."

The independent initiative taken by Oakland teachers and students must be broadened to the greatest extent possible prior to the launching of a potential strike later this month. A warning must be made that the OEA will betray Oakland teachers in the same manner that the UTLA sold out the teachers in Los Angeles.

To prevent this and to carry out the necessary political struggle to defend public education, teachers at all school sites should form independent rank-and-file committees. These committees should formulate their own demands, including an end to all school closures, the reconversion of all charter schools into public schools, a 30 percent raise for teachers and all education workers, a class size limit of no more than 20, and the doubling of all staff positions.



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