Oakland students walk out as school board prepares major cuts

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Last Friday, at least 4,000 high school students across Oakland either stayed home or walked out of class in a "sickout" coordinated by the students themselves, as a demonstration of solidarity with their teachers and their determination to fight to improve public education. Roughly 200 students, along with some parents, rallied outside Oakland Technical High School and marched down Broadway to the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) headquarters downtown.

In Oakland, teachers are in their second year of working without a contract, as negotiations between the school district and the Oakland Education Association (OEA) have dragged on for over 20 months. Last week, teachers voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike, with 95 percent voting in favor and a high rate of participation at 84 percent of all teachers.

The conditions in Oakland mirror those across the country that have led teachers to push back. Last year saw statewide strikes in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona, while last month more than 30,000 teachers in Los Angeles struck before the union declared it ended after six days on the basis of an agreement that failed to meet teachers' demands. The looming strike in Oakland will likely take place after the teachers strike in Denver, which is set to begin today.

Last week's student-led "sickout" followed two teacher-led wildcat "sickout" strikes that took place in December and January, in which hundreds of teachers participated. Both actions have also been organized independently of the OEA, which has acquiesced to the district's stalling tactics. The OEA deliberately isolated Oakland teachers from Los Angeles teachers during the strike last month, in the hopes of preventing a statewide teachers strike.

The student sickout Friday was organized throughout the week, primarily by upperclassmen at Oakland Technical High School, Oakland High School and Skyline High School, along with students from Madison Park Academy, Fremont High School, and McClymonds High School.

In an email that was widely distributed to teachers and students, the group of students 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."

In an effort to intimidate students and mitigate the impact of the sickout, OUSD Communications Director John Sasaki sent out a district-wide call Thursday to all families and staff, in which he warned that students participating in the sickout would miss the opportunity to supposedly have access to "on-site admissions opportunities and millions of dollars in scholarships to historically black colleges and universities." The district's effort to mitigate the walkout proved unsuccessful, as the vast majority of high school students stayed home or went to the rally.

At the rally, Samuel Getachew, a junior at Oakland Tech, told KQED, "Students are primarily the people that are affected the most by educational issues." He continued, "This is an action that will hopefully lose [the district] a lot of money, and through that, make them realize that not only are students willing to participate in these conversations, we want to so badly that we're willing to do anything it takes."

The conditions faced by students and their teachers in Oakland have become intolerable as a result of decades of austerity imposed at the local, state and national level, with the Democratic Party primarily responsibility for the local and state cuts. Custodial staff at every school have been cut significantly, creating unsanitary schools with rats and cockroaches, while many schools lack librarians, music programs, fine arts programs, and other essential

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elements of a well-rounded education. Class sizes have continually risen, while teachers in Oakland are the lowest-paid of any major school district in California, causing an exodus of roughly a fifth of all teachers every year.

The militancy of teachers and students, and their readiness to combat the dire crisis they face, stands in sharp contrast to the OEA's demands, which even if met would leave teachers underpaid and the district's schools in deep crisis. Currently OUSD is offering a 5 percent pay raise over three years, less than the inflation rate, which would still leave Oakland teachers as the lowest paid out of any large district in the state. OEA is proposing a 12 percent raise over three years, which would bring them up to the third-lowest.

The district has clearly signaled that it will fight even these minimal demands. The district began advertising on Craigslist for strikebreakers, offering them $300 a day. A first year, certificated teacher in the district only makes $250 a day. If the district does cave in the face of a strike, Kyla Johnson-Trammel, the superintendent, sent out an e-mail telling teachers that each percent raise they get above the district's initial offer will be funded by $1.9 million in cuts to the rest of the district.

The School Board is voting tonight on a planned $21.7 million in cuts to the budget, including 150 layoffs and a reduction in services. On the chopping block are several high school counselors, district-wide support for foster students, and cuts to the talent division, which is responsible for recruiting and onboarding teachers, a frequently delayed process. Roughly $30 million more in cuts are expected next year to make a "sustainable" budget, as the district is under threat of state receivership.

Major school closures are part of the superintendent's proposal for budget reductions, beginning next school year with the closure of Roots International Academy and then expanding to the potential merger and closure of nearly a third of the district-run schools. The superintendent's budget presentation lists the operational savings from school closures next year as only $81,000, significantly less than the superintendent's salary.

In these budget cuts, the school board is also laying the groundwork for future attacks on teacher pensions. The measure the school board is deliberating tonight lists a major reason for the cuts as the increasing "pension costs on the district's budget."

There is a worked-out plan nationwide for opening up all the billions of dollars going into public education for private profit. This has been carried out just as vigorously in Democratic-controlled parts of the country as Republican. Oakland Unified, which has been dominated by Democrats at the city, county, state and—under the eight years of the Obama administration—federal level is a prime example.

After the district was put under state receivership in 2003 with the support of then mayor Jerry Brown, the number of charter schools has soared so that now over a quarter of students are in privately run charter schools. A recent study, entitled *Breaking Point*, estimates that OUSD loses $57.3 million each year from the existence of 34 charter schools in the district compared to if all students were taught in district-run schools. This is because preferential funding and treatment is given to charter schools, which are then able to push the higher cost students, like those in special education, back to the district while taking full special education funding.

Significantly, the district is trying to justify its school closures by claiming under-enrollment of 11,000 in district-run schools. The total number of students currently enrolled in the district's charter schools is over 13,000.

Conditions in Oakland for teachers and students cannot be solved within the budget constraints that the school board and Democratic state legislature have set. In order to defend their students Oakland teachers must oppose all budget cuts and school closures and roll back charter schools.

The defense of public education requires the political mobilization of teachers throughout the country, in alliance with other sections of the working class and students, for a massive redistribution of wealth and a restructuring of the economy to meet social need, including the right to education for all youth. The unions, controlled by privileged executives and aligned with the Democratic Party, are opposed to any genuine struggle. Indeed, they have collaborated in the shutdown of strikes and the expansion of charter schools, in California and throughout the country.

The *World Socialist Web Site* calls on teachers in Oakland and beyond to form rank-and-file committees in every school and community, to organize a joint struggle, independent of the unions, and wage a national strike for public education.

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