

Oakland, California teachers set to strike this week

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Three thousand teachers in Oakland, California, are set to strike Thursday after voting overwhelmingly in favor of the action at the end of January. Educators in the Bay Area city have been working without a contract since July 2017 and have grown increasingly frustrated with the stalling tactics of the union, the Oakland Education Association (OEA), and the Democratic Party controlled school board.

Teachers are determined to fight against mass school closures, low wages, overcrowded classrooms, lack of support staff and the privatization of public education through charter schools. This has pit teachers against the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD), the city and the state, all long controlled by the Democratic Party, as well as against the union itself, which is aligned with the Democrats and has supported its austerity measures for decades.

OEA President Keith Brown announced the strike date during a Saturday press conference, following the release the previous day of a non-binding fact-finding report, the final phase in a drawn-out process of state mediation. Brown stated, “Bargaining with the district has not—in two years—produced an agreement that will pay teachers enough to allow them to stay in Oakland or make class sizes more conducive to teaching and learning or provide our students with the supports they need to thrive.”

The OEA said it had to wait for the conclusion of the fact-finding process before a strike and used this to justify its refusal to call out Oakland teachers at the same time as 33,000 were striking last month in Los Angeles, the nation’s second largest school district. In fact, the OEA and its parent organization, the National Education Association (NEA), feared that the two strikes could spark a statewide walkout against the state Democratic Party, which has overseen the defunding of

public education and a vast expansion of charter schools.

The final fact-finding report admits that funding for public education plummeted following the 2008 financial crisis, while charters have diverted much needed funds away from public schools and those most in need, such as special education students.

The report, however, upholds the bogus lie that there is no money for improving teacher pay and salaries—in a state that has the largest number of billionaires in America. The report at first calls for a 9 percent wage increase over three years—itsself barely above the rate of inflation—but claims OUSD would have too much difficulty accommodating this. It therefore suggests a 6 percent pay increase over two years with a renegotiation during the third year of the contract, which would give OUSD the opportunity to demand wage cuts.

On class sizes, the report suggests lowering the average number of students by one per class by July 2020, which would do little to change overcrowded classrooms. Token recommended reductions on caseloads for support staff such as nurses and psychologists would hardly do anything to address an already overworked and understaffed section of the school district. The report even calls for an increase in caseloads for resource specialists in special education from the current 1:26 average teacher-student ratio to 1:27 as a means of cutting costs.

OUSD and its superintendent Kyla Johnson-Trammel are currently demanding \$21.75 million in cuts over the next year, down from the original \$30 million. A school board vote planned for February 11 to rubber stamp the demand was postponed until February 25. Approximately 150 administrative and support staff positions are also on the chopping block. In addition, a

further \$30 million in cuts are expected the following year.

The minor reduction in cuts has provoked an angry response from the media. Questioned by reporters about the viability of backing off from the full budget cuts, OUSD's Chief Business Officer Marcus Battle refused to answer, saying instead, "The only reason I can't answer that is because we're in negotiations right now. If we weren't in negotiations, then we would just be trying to balance the budget. Because we're trying to do both, it makes it so we can't totally discuss what our position is."

In other words, the district is using the manufactured financial crisis to justify deepening attacks on teachers' and students' working and school conditions. This follows a well-trodden path used across the country to attack public education. State officials starve the schools of funding, local school officials divert scarce resources to charter schools and then the inevitable deficit is used to justify further school closings and privatization. District officials are threatening to close 24, or one-third, of OUSD schools. This has already begun with the announced closure of Roots International Academy in East Oakland.

Tony Thurmond, the state superintendent of schools endorsed by OEA and the California Teachers Association, voted last year for assembly bill 1840, which demands upwards of \$60 million in budget cuts from OUSD.

In fact, amongst the proposals Johnson-Trammell has made is the inclusion of up to \$5 million in cuts from funding for low-income and homeless youth, and English-language learners, all of whom make up a large percentage of OUSD students. The superintendent has stated that she will cut an additional \$1.9 million for each percent raise teachers get above the district's offer of 5 percent.

Oakland teachers already receive the lowest median pay of any district in California. OUSD has currently proposed a 5 percent pay raise, retroactive to July 1, 2017, over three years while OEA has requested a 12 percent pay increase for the same period, which would still leave Oakland teachers the third lowest-paid in the state.

OEA's paltry pay raise request, as well as an insufficient call for a reduction in already oversized classes from 2 to 4 students over the next two years,

and its acquiescence to the school closings, will only pave the way for new and greater attacks.

In opposing these attacks, Oakland teachers must assimilate the lessons of teachers' struggles throughout the past year, beginning with the West Virginia educator walkout and the more recent betrayals by the unions in Los Angeles and Denver, Colorado.

Whatever the rhetoric OEA employs, the union is opposed to waging the type of struggle which is required to defend teachers and public education because this would quickly develop into a direct political confrontation with new Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom and the Democrats who have a supermajority in both houses of the state legislature.

That is why Oakland teachers must form rank-and-file strike committees in every school and neighborhood to mobilize the teachers and the broadest sections of the working class across California and the country to fight the bipartisan attack on public education. A powerful industrial and political movement of the working class must be developed to carry out a frontal assault on the private fortunes of the corporate and financial elite and redistribute this wealth to meet social needs.

The claim that there are no resources is a fraud. The Bay Area is one of the richest regions in California, which would be the fifth largest economy in the world if it were its own nation. Workers throughout the region are heavily exploited by massive international corporations like Amazon, Tesla, UPS and various tech companies bringing in billions of dollars in profits. Yet none of this is being made available for the children of these workers—California ranks near the bottom in the country in per pupil spending—or their teachers.



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