

Build rank-and-file strike committees! Prepare to expand the strike!

A fighting program for Oakland teachers

WSWS Teacher Newsletter
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Oakland teachers are the latest to join the nationwide and, in fact, international battle of teachers to defend the right to a living wage and high-quality public education for our students. The conditions we are fighting—low pay, understaffing, lack of supplies, overcrowded classrooms, the threat of school closings, budget cuts and privatization—are familiar to educators the world over.

West Virginia teachers are walking out today—a year after sparking a series of statewide strikes across the US—to fight new plans to introduce charter schools for the first time in the state’s history. Last week, tens of thousands of teachers and childcare workers joined a general strike in Berlin. Welcoming the support of parents, one striking Berlin teacher declared, “Everyone knows the money is there, but it flows in one direction only, and there’s nothing there for education.”

While trillions are squandered on tax cuts, bailouts of Wall Street, endless wars and the brutalization of immigrants, every politician—whether it is Trump, his predecessor Obama, Governor Gavin Newsom or school district officials—claims there is no money for decent salaries or schools. Meanwhile, former Governor Jerry Brown oversaw the largest growth of the charter school industry in the nation, diverting desperately needed public resources to private corporations.

This struggle is not about a few more pennies in salary or a negligible reduction in class sizes. Even if the Oakland Education Association (OEA) achieved its meager demands on paper, they could all be eliminated tomorrow when district and state officials demand school closings, spending cuts, and staff reductions. Oakland teachers have to draw a line in the sand: we will not retreat and accept some miserable compromise.

What is at stake is the very right of our students to have free, high-quality public education, regardless of their socioeconomic circumstances.

That is why the *WSWS Teacher Newsletter* insists that Oakland teachers must not fight this battle alone. We call for the formation of rank-and-file strike committees in every school and community to mobilize the broadest support from students, parents and all workers throughout the Bay Area, California, West Virginia and beyond. Statewide strikes and a national walkout must be prepared to oppose the bipartisan attack on public education.

To carry out this fight, teachers must demand that the unions, which pull \$3 million in dues from Oakland teachers each year, pay striking teachers a \$1,000 stipend each week to sustain this struggle. The OEA has not called a strike since 1996 and there should, by rights, be plenty of money in the strike fund, which belongs to teachers, not union functionaries. At the same time, all negotiations must be live-streamed so that no backroom deals can be made. Rank-and-file committees of school workers must be allowed to inspect the financial books of both the school district and the unions.

These committees should organize mass meetings and online discussions to outline a real list of demands that begins with what teachers and students need, not what the corporate-controlled politicians say they can afford.

This should include:

- Full funding for education. The reversal of school closures and budget cuts! Every student deserves a well-funded school, with all the classes they need including the arts and physical education, near their home.
- An immediate 40 percent increase in wages for all teachers and support staff to make up for years of declining real income for educators who are currently

the lowest paid of any large district in California.

- A substantial reduction in class sizes! Elementary school students learn best with class sizes capped at 18, and higher grades should have no more than 24 with a teacher and an aide.

- Full staffing! A nurse at every school, counseling and behavior support for every student in need, an aide for every special education caseload.

- Convert all private charters back into public schools! In Oakland, the entire budget deficit is more than covered by the \$57 million the district forfeits to charter schools.

All of the politicians will howl that these demands are unreasonable, outrageous and unaffordable. But we live in a state which is home to the largest number of billionaires in the US. Instead of squeezing working-class families with more regressive taxes, education should be funded by the corporate and financial oligarchy, which has accumulated its unfathomable private fortunes at the expense of hundreds of millions of working people.

The wealthiest two of California's 114 billionaires, Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook and Larry Ellison of Oracle, could cover the budget of every K-12 school in California and still have \$20 billion each left over! Teachers should demand a massive increase in the taxes of the wealthy to fund public education.

There is widespread support for a struggle to defend and vastly improve public education. Over the past year, hundreds of thousands of teachers have conducted strikes in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona, Kentucky, Virginia, Colorado, and other states, and most recently in Los Angeles and Denver. The biggest obstacle to unifying teachers and other sections of workers has proven to be the teachers' unions themselves.

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA) have done everything they could to prevent the district and statewide strikes from coalescing into a national strike. The OEA dragged the state mediation and fact-finding process out until the United Teachers Los Angeles and the Denver Classroom Teachers Association shut down strikes in those cities.

By isolating strikes on a district-by-district basis, the unions have handed over the initiative to the powerful corporate and political forces, which are conducting a

nationwide assault on public education and are more than happy to pick off one group of teachers at a time. As for the leaders of the AFT and the NEA, Randi Weingarten and Lily Eskelsen-Garcia—who make \$543,150 and \$414,824 respectively—they inhabit an entirely different universe from teachers and have no intention of attacking the wealth of their fellow one-percenters.

In the meantime, the AFT and NEA have told teachers to place their confidence in the Democratic Party. But the strikes in Washington state, Los Angeles, Denver and now Oakland demonstrate that the Democrats are just as much enemies of teachers and public education as Trump, DeVos and the Republicans. Appeals to Governor Newsom and state School Superintendent Tony Thurmond, who voted for Assembly Bill 1840 currently being used to bludgeon the district into making \$60 million in budget cuts or face state receivership, are worse than useless.

Oakland teachers do, however, have powerful allies—the workers of the Bay Area, across California and the US, and internationally. All over the world opposition to austerity and social inequality is growing. There is a growing recognition that there is something dead wrong with the capitalist system, which subordinates every aspect of life to private profit and has put more wealth in the hands of three billionaires—Jeff Bezos, Warren Buffett, and Bill Gates—than the bottom 160 million people who live in the US.

Oakland teachers are taking a courageous stand. They must now appeal for support to the tens of millions of working class people—in the factories, offices, public sector, Amazon and UPS warehouses, in the telecom, retail and service industries—who face the same enemies and the same fight. The *WSWS Teacher Newsletter* will do everything in its power to link up the struggle of Oakland teachers with all sections of the working class.



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