Powerful support for Oakland teachers' strike

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22 February 2019

Nearly all 3,000 teachers in Oakland, California went on strike Thursday in their first walkout in over 20 years. Like the other teacher strikes that have swept across the country over the last 12 months, Oakland teachers, who are fighting for increases in pay and school funding, reduced class sizes and against threatened school closures, have won popular support from parents, students and other workers.

Although Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) kept schools open with a skeleton staff of administrators and "emergency" substitutes, the vast majority of parents kept their children home or sent them to solidarity schools run by strikers and volunteers. Teachers reported that less than 70 students out of over 2,000 at Oakland Technical High School crossed the picket line while only eight out of 750 Fremont High School students showed up. Many classified and support staff who also have expired contracts also joined the picket lines alongside families.

The strike is the latest in a wave of walkouts by teachers, which began exactly a year ago in West Virginia. In every case, teachers are fighting over the same issues and facing the same enemies: decades of defunding, falling living standards, punitive evaluation schemes to scapegoat teachers, and a bipartisan drive to close public schools and expand for-profit charter schools.

While teachers have fought courageously, the National Education Association (NEA), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and their state and local affiliates have isolated each struggle, leaving individual sections of educators to fight the powerful corporate and political forces that have a national and international strategy to destroy public education. In strike after strike, most recently in Los Angeles, Denver and in West Virginia again, the unions cut deals that ignored teachers' demands and only emboldened the proponents of school privatization.

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) distributed over 1,000 copies of the *WSWS Teachers Newsletter* statement, "A fighting program for Oakland teachers," at Thursday's rally and at picket lines across the city. Insisting that "Oakland teachers must not fight this battle alone," the statement called 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."

Oakland teachers, who have been working without a contract since July 2017, receive the lowest pay of any major district in the state despite living in the San Francisco Bay Area, one of the most expensive metropolitan areas in the whole country. Understaffing, lack of supplies and a student body bearing the brunt of America's social crisis all contribute to a retention crisis that has left 17 percent of Special Education teachers and 10 percent of general education teachers without a credential. Students are regularly subjected to long-term substitutes or even vacant classrooms.

"We're out here on strike for better pay, more supports for our students, and in opposition to the drive to privatize public education through charter schools," Rumeli, a social worker at Oakland High School who works with recent immigrant students, told the WSWS.

"I'm the only social worker for over 200 immigrant students at my school. These are high-needs students, primarily from Central America, who have escaped from a multitude of different kinds of trauma," Rumeli said. "They then end up in Oakland, often separated

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from their parents who have to stay behind, and when here they face poverty and more trauma."

Denouncing the fascistic attack on immigrants by the Trump administration, she concluded, "the border wall is heinous. I don't believe in borders. I agree that the working class has to unite globally."

Wednesday night, OUSD aligned its pay offer with a fact finder's report. The offering of a seven percent raise, spread out over four years, would be an effective pay cut since inflation in the Bay Area is growing at three percent a year. The proposed class size reductions are equally pitiful. Schools, except those in high demand, would see class sizes reduced by only one student in two years. Those schools with more than 95 percent high-need students would have class sizes reduced by one more in three years.

This paltry proposal is contingent on extra funding from the state legislature in Sacramento and the district adopting a staggered school day. For its part, OEA's demands barely exceed the district offer. The union is calling for a 12 percent raise over three years that would still leave district pay as the third lowest in the state, and class size reductions of two students over three years, doubling to four for high-need schools. Superintendent Kyla Johnson-Trammell has stated that for every percent raise the teachers get over the district offer, she will cut an additional $1.9 million.

"Last year, nearly half of the teachers here left, a lot to San Leandro where they can make $10,000 more a year. Even if we get a 12 percent raise, that barely keeps up with inflation," Grace Velazquez, a teacher at Roots International Academy, noted.

The school board has announced plans to close almost a third of the district's schools and carry out nearly $60 million in budget cuts over the next two years, including laying off counselors and other support staff.

Conditions in Oakland are familiar to teachers across the country as decades of bipartisan and corporate-backed school "reforms" have gutted public education. Fearing that individual teacher struggles will coalesce into a national general strike, the NEA and AFT have isolated them district by district and state by state. The unions shut down this week's two-day strike in West Virginia based on worthless promises from the state's billionaire governor on the same day as Oakland teachers began their strike.

In an appearance on the picket lines in Oakland, Eric Heins, the president of the NEA-aligned California Teachers Association (CTA) pointed to the wave of teacher strikes and said, "Oakland teachers are standing up, but they are not standing up alone," because the 325,000-member CTA stood behind them.

There is no doubt that teachers across California, including teachers in Sacramento who are voting on strike action, and teachers across the country want to stand with Oakland teachers. The biggest obstacle to the unity of teachers are the unions, including the CTA, which is aligned with the Democrats and led by affluent businessmen like Heins (annual salary $338,509) who have no intention to oppose austerity and social inequality. Heins said, "it was hard to strike," but offered no strike benefits to the embattled Oakland teachers, even though the CTA has assets of a quarter of a billion dollars and revenue of $186 million. Instead of strike benefits, the CTA funds Democrats who are spearheading the attack on public education in California.

The OEA has tried to set up a press conference Friday morning with Democratic Senator and presidential candidate Kamala Harris, first at Castlemont High School, then Fremont High, but opposition among rank-and-file teachers angered over her right-wing education and law-and-order policies forced the union to change plans.

The *WSWS Teacher Newsletter* calls upon Oakland teachers to break free from the conspiracy of the unions and the Democratic Party and organize rank-and-file committees to unite teachers with workers in the Bay Area, across California and the US, and internationally to organize a powerful counteroffensive to defend public education.

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