

Oakland, California teachers press for expansion of strike as union seeks to contain struggle

Evan Blake
23 February 2019

The strike of 3,000 teachers in Oakland, California completed its second day Friday, as educators across the city maintained their picket lines and assembled for a rally attended by more than 1,000 people.

The struggle of Oakland teachers is part of a growing wave of strikes throughout the country and internationally, including strikes this year of teachers in Los Angeles, Denver, and West Virginia in the US, and strikes in Mexico, Argentina, Morocco, Tunisia, Denmark, France, and the UK.

There is enormous support for the striking teachers from workers in Oakland and across the Bay Area, with community members joining pickets, passersby continuously honking in support of teachers, and an atmosphere of solidarity pervading the city.

Despite this broad popular support, the Oakland Education Association (OEA) is working to isolate teachers and reach an agreement with the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) as quickly as possible.

The OUSD released an insulting contract proposal Wednesday. The offer includes a derisory seven percent raise spread out over four years, which will not keep pace with inflation, meaning that teachers will face an effective pay cut. The proposal also includes class size reductions of only one student in two years for most schools. Both these proposals are contingent on extra funding from the state legislature in Sacramento and the district adopting a staggered school day.

An automated message sent out Friday evening on behalf of Superintendent Kyla Johnson-Trammell to OUSD employees and families stated in part, “We look forward to having everyone return to the classroom to return to the business of teaching and learning,” while noting that the strike will likely continue on Monday.

At the pickets and rallies, and on its website, the OEA has provided no update on their demands or any rebuttal to the district’s offer. Instead, OEA officials are working behind the scenes to reach a deal, while promoting Democratic Party politicians and allowing them to stage photo ops at pickets.

At the OEA rally Friday, OEA President Keith Brown repeatedly told the assembled teachers that they were fighting to demand “a fully funded system of public education” and a “living wage.”

In fact, at an OEA Site Representative meeting Monday, the union leadership opposed an attempt to include budget cuts as part of negotiations, effectively ensuring that the demanded \$60 million in budget cuts goes forward. This occurred over one month after Johnson-Trammell threatened in a district-wide email that for every percent raise the teachers get over the district offer, she will cut an additional \$1.9 million from the budget.

The official proposals of the OEA in the negotiations, even if they ended up in a final agreement with OUSD—a highly unlikely outcome—do not address the concerns impelling teachers into struggle. Nor will they do anything to resolve the broader social crisis facing the entire working class in Oakland, which teachers experience in their classrooms every day and which drastically undermines their ability to teach.

The OEA’s proposal for a 12 percent pay raise over three years would leave Oakland teachers the third-lowest paid of any major city in California, while its proposed class size staffing ratio reductions would have no significant impact on working conditions.

The *WSWS Teachers Newsletter* spoke to teachers, students, and parents at Oakland Technical High

School Friday on the issues they confront. Reporters distributed a statement calling for the formation of rank-and-file committees in every school, workplace and community, independent of the unions and the Democratic and Republican parties.

Joyce, a longtime substitute teacher in OUSD, described a school system that “wears teachers down so fast, with such low pay, that new ones are always leaving.” She explained that her granddaughter, recently accredited, was bright and enthusiastic about teaching students, “but how long is it going to take to wear her down? After a while, being in such poor conditions, we give up.”

Susan, a teacher who recently moved to Oakland from Baltimore, described how far her paycheck went in the expensive Bay Area. “You should see what I’m paying \$1,800 a month for,” she said, noting that the cost of her tiny apartment is multiple times that of a spacious house in other parts of the country. When WSWS reporters shared that the district was offering a seven percent raise over four years, Susan said, “That’s an insult.”

Susan spoke of the growing militancy of teachers and their readiness for a nationwide strike. “I’ve got friends all over the country, friends in Florida, where they don’t have the right to strike, friends in Baltimore, where they recently gained it, who are all talking to me about how to strike. They are all ready to strike.”

The WSWS also spoke to many high school students who had come to march and protest with their teachers.

One student said that while the media likes to “pit students against teachers,” the reality is that “teachers are working to help their students with assignments even while they’re on strike.”

Nick, a high schooler, said, “Yes, they are on strike for us, for all of us. This is not about greedy teachers, this is about saving public education.” A friend of his stated, “There is overwhelming support from the student body,” to which all the surrounding students agreed.

Although many teachers expressed illusions in the unions, teachers unanimously greeted with enthusiasm the call by the *WSWS Teachers Newsletter* for a state- and nationwide strike. Nodding in approval as he took our flier, Mico, a teacher, said, “Statewide strike? We need a nationwide general strike.”

To carry their struggle forward, Oakland teachers

must turn out to the broader working class. A public appeal should be made to all workers to join the fight of teachers and prepare for a political general strike. Teachers should be mobilized to leaflet BART stations and workplaces across the Bay Area.

To carry out such a campaign requires the formation of rank-and-file strike committees that are independent of the OEA, which is doing everything in its power to contain and isolate teachers from their working class allies. The *WSWS Teachers Newsletter* will provide the necessary political leadership to organize such strike committees and coordinate their efforts to unify the working class.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact