

Why is there no strike pay for Oakland teachers?

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The teachers on strike in Oakland, California, are fighting for increased funding to public education, to secure a living wage, and to put an end to the privatization of schools. The Oakland Education Association (OEA), however, is bargaining for a pittance, a wage increase that barely keeps pace with inflation, and a negligible reduction in class sizes. The OEA has excluded from its demand any challenge to the school board's proposal to slash \$60 million from the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) budget.

To carry their struggle forward, Oakland teachers must build rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, which begin with what teachers and their students need, not what corporate-controlled politicians claim is affordable. This will require mobilizing the broadest sections of the working class in a powerful industrial and political fight against the entrenched wealth of the corporate and financial elite, which is protected by both corporate-controlled parties, and, in California particularly, the Democratic Party.

This is a class war and teachers need to marshal all the resources—human and financial—to sustain this fight.

The Oakland Education Association, however, is not providing a penny in strike benefits to the embattled teachers even though union dues are regularly deducted from their paychecks. Historically, the provision of strike pay was one of the elemental tasks of unions, demanded by workers to offset the pressure of the employers starving workers into submission. Today, the OEA and its state and national affiliates are joining the school board in exerting economic pressure on teachers.

In lieu of strike pay, the OEA is providing insulting “strike grants” and zero percent interest loans through a local credit union. The grants are needs-based, requiring OEA members to go through the humiliating

process of proving their “need,” by submitting confidential financial paperwork. The amounts to be doled out are a meager \$500, \$1,000 or \$1,500. Further, teachers can only apply for these grants if the strike extends for five days, at which point they will have lost nearly 3 percent of their annual pay.

The Bay Area is one of the most expensive areas to live in the entire world. The median cost of rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Oakland is \$2,950—a 75 percent increase since 2011—making Oakland the sixth most expensive city to live in the US. The pittance on offer by the OEA will leave teachers out to dry and place enormous pressure on them to return to work or leave their pickets to take on a second job during the strike.

If teachers' union dues aren't spent on maintaining strike benefits, this begs the question: where is this money going?

Every year, upwards of \$1,100 is extracted from Oakland teachers' paychecks and sent to the coffers of the unions. Instead of using this money to provide strike benefits, the vast majority of the money extracted from workers is funneled to the OEA's parent unions—California Teachers Association (CTA) and the National Education Association (NEA), to fund the exorbitant salaries of their bloated staffs and the campaigns of various Democrats.

On its tax filing form from 2015, the OEA listed their revenue as less than \$560,000. With roughly 3,300 teachers paying annual dues of \$1,100, only 15 percent of the total reportedly goes to the OEA.

The CTA and NEA's 2016 IRS Form 990, which reports the financial information of non-profit organizations, lists the salaries of top union bureaucrats, campaign contributions to the Democratic Party, and hundreds of millions of dollars in financial

investments.

In 2015, the CTA reported roughly \$178 million in income from “membership dues” from its 325,000 members, \$3.7 million in “investment income” and \$3.2 million in “other revenue.” Their expenditures included an astronomical \$90.2 million in salaries and \$95.4 million on “other expenses.” These include \$3 million for “officers and directors,” \$44 million for “other salaries,” \$7.6 million for “travel,” and \$5 million for “conferences.” The revenue and expense of the NEA follow a similar pattern, but the numbers are even larger than those of the CTA.

The CTA in 2015 paid its top eight executives over \$300,000 each, with four receiving over \$400,000 and another two, Executive Director Joe Nunez and Associate Executive Director Emma Leheny, receiving over \$450,000. The NEA in the same year paid 13 of its executives over \$300,000, with three receiving over \$400,000, and two, President Lily Eskelsen Garcia and Executive Director John Stocks, receiving \$532,398 and \$541,138 respectively. At the average dues rate of an Oakland teacher, it takes the combined total annual dues of 7,989 teachers to sustain the corporate salaries and compensation packages of these twenty-one parasites on the union board. That is more than twice the number of teachers in the Oakland district.

Alongside the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the NEA is a critical player in the Democratic Party. AFT President Randi Weingarten made \$543,000 last year and as a member of the Democratic National Committee and Hillary Clinton delegate played a chief role in the dirty tricks to prevent the presidential nomination from going to Bernie Sanders.

The unions’ ties to the Democrats and their leaders’ executive salaries exposes their thoroughly anti-working class character and their contempt for teachers. In California and all other states controlled by the Democrats, they have proven equally ruthless as their Republican counterparts in eviscerating funding for public education. In recent decades, California has plummeted from 1st to 43rd in per-pupil spending on K-12 public education.

In a visit to the Oakland picket lines last week, CTA President Eric Heins (2015 union income \$318,000) claimed, “These are the kinds of things that all teachers in California stand for and the 325,000 teachers of the California Teachers Association stand fully behind

Oakland Education Association teachers and Oakland.”

This is a fraud. The chief role of the unions has been to prevent simultaneous strikes by teachers, which the union executives fear could spark a nationwide strike that would challenge the austerity measures of the Democrats and Republicans and threaten the monopolization of wealth by the capitalist class and the affluent layers like the union executives themselves. That is why Lily Eskelsen Garcia has spent the past year flying across the country with Weingarten—using union dues to pay for travel—in order to shut down and sellout teachers strikes wherever they emerge.

A genuine campaign to defend public education will require the building of independent organizations of struggle, rank-and-file strike committees answerable to the teachers themselves. To sustain and expand the strike, teachers must demand a \$1,000 a week strike benefit. This money belongs to teachers and they have every right to it to sustain this historic fight.



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