

Growing calls for nation-wide struggle as unions work to shut down Oakland teachers strike

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The strike by over 3,300 Oakland, California teachers begins its third day today. The struggle has won widespread support within the working class of Oakland and across the Bay Area. It is the latest expression of the growth of the class struggle within the United States and internationally.

There is strong sentiment in Oakland, throughout California and across the country for a united fight by teachers and other sections of the working class in defense of public education. In states that saw strikes last year, including Oklahoma and Arizona, teachers are raising the demand for a renewed struggle.

Last week, teachers in West Virginia carried out a two-day strike, one year after educators in the state initiated the wave of teachers strikes in the US in 2018. The West Virginia strike followed a three-day strike by teachers in Denver, Colorado and a six-day strike by teachers in Los Angeles, California.

Internationally, there have been teachers strikes in Mexico, Argentina, Morocco, Tunisia, Denmark, France and the UK. In São Paulo, Brazil, teachers have been on strike since February 4 in opposition to attacks on pensions.

The chief obstacle to the development of a united struggle is the trade unions. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA) have worked to isolate every separate struggle, channel opposition behind the Democratic Party and prevent any two sections of teachers from being on strike at the same time.

Independently of the unions, teachers are seeking a way to expand their struggle. Some have raised the call for reaching out to dockworkers this week to appeal to them to shut down the Port of Oakland, the fifth busiest

container port in the US.

The *World Socialist Web Site Teachers Newsletter* calls on teachers in Oakland to form rank-and-file strike committees to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the unions. Teachers should formulate their own demands for the strike and reach out to teachers throughout the country and other sections of the working class to prepare a nationwide general strike.

In Oakland, the unions are working closely with the Democratic Party—which controls political power in California and has fully participated in the attack on public education—to isolate and shut down the strike on the basis of an agreement that does not meet any of the central demands of the teachers.

Democrats in California have overseen decades of austerity that have caused per-pupil spending to plummet from 1st to 43rd in the country. While claiming to represent Oakland teachers, the Oakland Education Association (OEA) and its parent organizations, the California Teachers Association (CTA) and the NEA, have continually endorsed and channeled funds to Democratic politicians.

The cuts imposed by the union-endorsed Democrats have made Oakland among the poorest major districts in California. The school board is now looking to impose further cuts, threatening to close up to a third of all Oakland public schools. While teachers are mounting the picket lines intent on securing full funding for public education, the OEA is only requesting a three-year, 12 percent pay raise, which barely keeps pace with inflation, and a negligible reduction in class size.

The right to a quality public education cannot be

defended through the union, which is operating entirely within the terms of the school board and has refused to include the proposed \$60 million budget cuts in its negotiations.

The Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) has no intention of budging even slightly in its austerity agenda, which seeks to use the proposed school closures as a basis for channeling more public funds into private schools. Talks between the school board and the union bargaining team broke down over the weekend, with no talks taking place on Saturday and the Sunday attempt at resuming discussion quickly coming to an end.

Looking to shut down the strike, the OEA announced on Sunday evening that it is seeking the assistance of Democratic Party politicians to resolve the dispute, appealing to the same forces responsible for the slashing the state's education budget.

Speaking for the OEA bargaining team in its evening press conference, 2nd Vice President Chaz Garcia declared: "We are going to need somebody who can help us, or some way that we can actually get things done, because the district has yet to do so. So, moving forward, Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond is going to come in and see if he can help the district understand how they need to do things differently. And that is set to happen tomorrow."

Thurmond was elected State Superintendent of Public Instruction in California last year, with the full support of the OEA and CTA, which funded his campaign. The unions gave their endorsement to his candidacy only months after Thurmond, then a member of the State Assembly, voted in favor of Assembly Bill 1840, which is being used by OUSD to impose \$60 million in cuts over the next two years and the closure or consolidation of one-third of Oakland public schools to pay the budget deficit.

The latest bargaining update released by OEA shows that they are already caving on essential demands, including class sizes, caseloads for Special Education, and staffing ratios for nurses and counselors. The function of Thurmond and the Democratic Party is to hasten the process of shutting down of the strike.

While the OEA looks to Thurmond to seal their backroom deal, they are also promoting other Democratic Party figures. The OEA had announced that Robert Reich, a UC Berkeley professor, will be the

main speaker at a rally of striking teachers to be held today at noon. Reich served as Labor Secretary in the Clinton administration, the foremost promoter of "school choice" in the 1990s.

Any agreement reached by these forces will be made on the basis of expanding charter schools, imposing austerity budgets and keeping Oakland teachers among the poorest in the state.

The only way in which the striking teachers can carry out their fight to defend public education is by forming rank-and-file committees independent of the union and building for a nationwide strike. This fight must be based on rejecting the parameters of austerity within which the negotiations are currently being conducted. Teachers must insist on what is necessary for their students, not what is acceptable to the capitalist class, which can find billions for war and the attack on immigrants and not a penny for public education.

The attack on public education is part of the broader onslaught against the rights and living standards of the working class across the United States and around the world. It is this global attack that produced the series of teachers strikes across the United States.

A genuine fight to defend public education will inevitably encounter the resistance of all those who defend the wealth and power of the corporate and financial elite, Democrats no less than Republicans. The ruling class is intent on transforming public education into a for-profit enterprise and yet another instrument for extracting profit.

The growing movement of teachers and other sections of the working class must become the spearhead for the building of a political movement of the working class in opposition to both big business parties and the capitalist system they defend.



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