

“We need a national strike!”

Oakland teachers and students speak on third day of strike

Our reporters
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On Monday, the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to teachers and students across Oakland as the teachers strike entered its third day. The more than 3,300 striking workers have widespread support from workers across the San Francisco Bay Area, as well as from their own students, hundreds of whom showed up to march and picket on Monday.

The *WSWS Teachers Newsletter* passed out hundreds of copies of this statement, warning teachers that the union was preparing to end the strike in collaboration with Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond, who was brought into negotiations by the Oakland Education Association (OEA) over the weekend. Thurmond voted for State Assembly Bill 1840 last year, the bill the Oakland school district is using to impose \$60 million in cuts over the next two years—including the closure or consolidation of a third of public schools.

Though many teachers retained illusions in the union, almost everyone greeted the *WSWS*’s slogan of a nationwide teachers strike with enthusiasm. “That’s what we need!” exclaimed many teachers as they took our pamphlet.

Teachers interviewed by the *WSWS* spoke at length about the deteriorating social conditions facing them and their students.

Rose, a teacher at Fremont High School, located in Fruitvale, one of the poorest areas of Oakland, said, “Many of my students are refugees, many coming from Central America.” He added that “often, several of my students will ask to be let out early so that they can go and make money.” He explained that this was often “because they are in debt, eight or nine thousand, to coyotes [human smugglers who bring people across the

border], and fear for themselves and their family if they do not pay.”

Rose showed reporters pictures on his phone of the lunches that he personally makes for his students. “Every day, between 15 and 30 students eat lunch that I’ve prepared for them in my classroom.” Asked if it was because of the quality of food he said, “It’s not just the cafeteria food quality. It’s also these classic American dishes—spaghetti, pizza—served to a school that’s 60 percent immigrant, many who have just come here.”

School lunch programs are coordinated nationally through large food companies trying to sell the cheapest meal plan to a district. A 2017 report by the Brookings Institution found that the quality of school lunches directly impacts test performance and cognitive development, both in the short- and long-term. In the United States, 13 million, or one in six children, go hungry for significant periods of time every year.

When asked about charter schools, Rose replied, “It’s not exactly charter schools that are the problem, it’s the whole corporate assault and takeover of public education that needs to be stopped.” Rose budgets \$200 a month for his students, and was also buying and preparing food for teachers during the strike.

Ericson, a senior at Fremont, described the strike as “really necessary.” He explained, “If a teacher is not getting well-paid and has to search for another job, or having second thoughts about teaching in Oakland, it impacts the quality of education.”

“A lot of students are showing for the teachers, [because] they feel like OUSD [Oakland Unified School District] is not doing a good job, the school facilities in particular.”

Ericson, who recently immigrated from Nigeria, said that he felt the strike by teachers was connected to his own future. “The education you get at the grassroots level determines where you go in life,” he said. “We have to start from the beginning to fund us.”

Elanor, another high school student, came to show her support at the lunchtime rally at Oscar Grant Plaza, in the heart of downtown. She and her fellow students said there was broad support for teachers. Asked about the defunding of the arts, she explained, “I think STEM is really important and has a role in opening up paths in lives for students; however, music and art is really great too and should play an important role in our lives as well.”

The WSWs spoke to Robby, Karin and Laura, three school psychologists who were eager to have their group seen by the press. They rightly fear that their demands will remain untouched in the new contract.

The three psychologists explained that the national psychological standards suggest having one school psychologist per 700 students. But, according to Karin, she finds herself being the only psychologist one-and-a-half days a week for a school of over 900 students—which works out to one psychologist per 3,000 students. Robby and Laura explained that school psychologists are supposed to be offering genuine psychological support to students, but due to a mixture of being overworked and misused as psychological examiners, they were almost exclusively used to do psychological evaluations of students.

After speaking about the Los Angeles strike, Karin explained that she had seen what had happened to the Los Angeles school psychologists (who got nothing in the new contract) and was concerned. Her group had made an effort in the past few days to get noticed and meet with members of the OEA bargaining team.

WSWS reporters stressed that the only way forward was to unify across districts and across states. Karin interjected enthusiastically, “We need a national strike!” Our reporters made the point that Randi Weingarten, who takes in over half a million a year, has been flying state to state to shut down strikes, making sure no two strikes happen at the same time, in an effort to stop expansion of the strikes. “That’s a real problem,” exclaimed one of them.

The WSWs also spoke to Will, a high school senior at Oakland Tech. He and four of his classmates nodded

enthusiastically when asked if the student body supported striking teachers. Will said, “The strike is not really about teachers’ pay—yes, the teachers need to be paid more—but it’s really about public education as a whole, they are striking for us.”

Isaac, a physical education teacher in East Oakland, also stressed this point. “Every day,” he said, “my students are faced with a choice: poverty, gangs, drugs or the much more difficult task of getting an education and a job.” The WSWs explained that even then many students are faced with immense difficulties, including student debt, and stressed that money had to be taken from the billionaires and multimillionaires of the country to fund education. Isaac agreed. “How can we do anything about this, how can we keep people off the streets, if our schools are broke?” he said.



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