

Unions, Democrats rush to end strike as Oakland teachers resist attack on public education

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With the strike by 3,000 Oakland, California teachers entering its fourth day, the Oakland Education Association (OEA) and California Teachers Association (CTA) are scrambling with state Democrats to end the strike as soon as possible, based on terms wholly acceptable to the financial interests that dictate school funding levels.

While the unions are working with State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond to reach an agreement with district officials, the school board is adamantly refusing to grant any pay raise that exceeds the rate of inflation.

Like previous teacher strikes, including most recently in Los Angeles, Denver, Colorado and West Virginia, teachers have won popular support for their fight not just for improved wages but to defeat the nationwide attack on public education. At a number of the larger school sites, striking teachers have organized flying pickets to assist teachers at sites where strikebreakers are being employed.

AC Transit workers have refused to cross the picket lines and eight bus routes have been shut down. Although the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) have not called out their members, clerical workers, custodians and other workers joined the picket lines each day.

On Monday, both unions announced that they would no longer protect these workers from retribution and said they would have to return to work, effectively ordering them to cross the teachers' picket lines.

The OEA has called for a 12 percent pay raise over three years, which barely keeps pace with inflation, and a slight reduction in class sizes. At the same time, it has

rejected any fight against demands by the school board to pay for any raises through the slashing of educational funding and services. The board, which is offering teachers a 7 percent pay raise over four years and a 1.5 percent one-time bonus, has said it is seeking a \$60 million reduction in spending over the next two years and the closure of one-third of the district's schools.

Chris Learned, the Fiscal Oversight Trustee of the school district, has made it clear that he will not allow anything over the district's offer. Learned was appointed trustee to oversee the district's finances when the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) was placed under direct state control in exchange for a bailout because of its chronic underfunding. While the district is no longer in receivership, Learned functions as a dictator for the banks and has the power to veto any measure he deems will "put the district in financial distress."

Learned issued a written statement on Sunday: "Under my authority as the Fiscal Oversight Trustee for OUSD, I will stay and/or rescind any agreement that would put the district in financial distress... A 12 percent salary increase would do just that. What the district has on the table now is what the district can afford."

This makes clear that Oakland teachers, like their counterparts throughout the US, are not fighting this or that school board official but the powerful financial interests that control the school budgets and which are behind the relentless drive to privatize public education.

Aware that they cannot sell the district's offer to their membership, the OEA called in Democratic State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond,

recently elected with the support and funding of the California Teachers Association, to mediate the talks. Thurmond played a similar role in the Los Angeles strike last month, assisting United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) in ramming through a sell-out agreement on 33,000 striking teachers. This opened the door for LAUSD superintendent Austin Beutner, a Democrat and former investment banker, to begin the breakup of the nation's second largest school district in order to facilitate the expansion of for-profit charter schools.

The OEA staged a rally shortly after noon Monday at Frank Ogawa Plaza in downtown Oakland, where they paraded Robert Reich, the one-time Secretary of Labor for President Bill Clinton, a proponent of "school choice." UTLA President Alex Caputo-Pearl, the architect of the betrayal of the Los Angeles strike, told teachers to look to state Democrats like Thurmond and Governor Gavin Newsom to increase school funding, while OEA President Keith Brown declared that the solution to the bargaining impasse was to "get more money from the city and the county."

In fact, it was Tony Thurmond who voted last year for Assembly Bill 1840, which mandated that Oakland close public schools to service the repayment of its debt. Also seated at the negotiating table today was the staff of State Senator Nancy Skinner, another union-backed Democrat, who voted for over \$20 billion in education cuts.

Teachers must take this as a warning: the OEA and CTA are preparing to sell out the strike.

If teachers are to prevent this betrayal, they must form rank-and-file strike committees to take the conduct of the strike and negotiations out of the hands of the unions. These committees must elect representatives to oversee the talks and prevent any backroom deals by insisting that all negotiations are live-streamed to the members. Teachers must insist now that they have three full days to review and discuss the full details of any contract and that there be no return to work without a ratification vote.

By rejecting another sellout and taking the control of the strike, rank-and-file teachers will inspire and win the active support of workers throughout the Bay Area, Sacramento, where teachers are voting for strike action, and throughout California to fight for a general strike to defend public education. Oakland teachers must draw a

line in the sand and fight for what their students need, not accept what corporate-controlled politicians say they can afford.



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