Fremont, California teachers stage sick-out

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On Tuesday, February 19, teachers in Fremont, California, who have been working without a contract for the entire 2018-2019 academic year, staged a sick-out. The wildcat work action, coming just two days before the start of the strike by 3,000 teachers in nearby Oakland, involved 50 out of 92 teachers at Mission San Jose High School.

The sick-out has been blacked out in the local media, reflecting the fear within the ruling class and the political establishment that the renewed wave of teachers' strikes—already including Los Angeles, Denver, West Virginia and Oakland—will spread further and escape the control of the pro-corporate trade unions.

The only publication to report the work action was the student newspaper at Mission San Jose, the *Smoke Signal*.

The Fremont Unified District Teachers Association (FUDTA) denounced the sick-out, underscoring its role as an instrument of the state to suppress the resistance of educators to the destruction of their living standards and public education itself.

FUDTA President Victoria Birbeck posted a notice on the Fremont Teachers Facebook page stating: "2/3 of MSJHS teachers were absent today. This action was not a union-authorized nor union-organized event."

Teachers and other school staff have been kept largely in the dark about contract negotiations between the FUDTA and the Fremont Unified School District (FUSD). However, the school board recently posted an update revealing that the district is offering a paltry two percent raise for the 2018-2019 school year, up from an initial offer of 0.51 percent. Starting in 2019-2020, the FUSD proposes to tie any salary increases to increased employee pension costs, reducing future raises to a maximum of 1-2 percent per year.

The FUDTA has rejected this offer, but its counteroffer is barely an improvement. FUDTA negotiators have proposed a raise of 4 percent for the current academic year, with future raises tied to a state-calculated cost of living adjustment (COLA), plus an additional one percent. After the most recent bargaining session, on February 12, the two parties have agreed to a "fact finding" process.

The FUDTA is affiliated with the California Teachers Association (CTA), along with almost 1,000 other local associations in the state, including the Oakland Education Association, which is currently on strike. The CTA is part of the National Education Association (NEA), which collects dues from nearly 3 million members throughout the country, making it the largest union in the US.

Teachers, private and public, pay well over $1,000 per year in dues to either the NEA or the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). These organizations, however, are instrumental in enabling the two big-business parties to impose cuts in real wages, increased health care costs, increased pension contributions and the systematic undermining of conditions in the public schools. They accept and facilitate the privatization of education and spread of for-profit charter schools.

They have served over the past two years of teachers' rebellions and strikes to isolate the various struggles, suppress them and impose sellout contracts that fail to meet any of the educators' demands. The fact that the FUDTA, the Oakland Education Association and the state and national unions are silent on the Fremont teachers' wildcat and are keeping the struggles of teachers in Fremont and nearby Oakland separate underscores the unions' treacherous role.

The dues that come out of teachers' checks every month go to fund the lucrative salaries of presidents Lily Eskelsen (NEA) and Randi Weingarten (AFT), whose total compensation is $416,633 and $497,118, respectively. Forty-eight individuals in the NEA and twenty-eight in the AFT make over $200,000 in total

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compensation each year. Hundreds more make over $100,000. In the 2018 election cycle, each of these organizations contributed over $20,000,000 to politicians, almost exclusively within the Democratic Party.

In Fremont, as in Oakland and Los Angeles, issues such as housing and health care that confront the working class as a whole are even more pronounced. According to Zillow, as of January 31, the median home price in Fremont is $1,137,800—an 11.2 percent increase over the past year.

As more tech and finance jobs have been created in and around Silicon Valley, there has been little done to build more housing units in order to keep housing affordable, especially for sections of the working class involved in manufacturing, retail or services. Monthly rental costs hover over $3,000, two to three times other areas of the country. The ever-rising cost of housing in the district has led teachers to move many miles away and face long and crowded commutes—or leave the profession or region altogether.

Noticeably absent from bargaining discussions between the school board and FUDTA representatives is the fact that Fremont teachers do not have health care included in their salary. The lowest-cost health insurance premiums in the district run from bare bones catastrophic coverage plans at $543.19 per month up to $1,131.68 per month—for an individual.

Employees pay the full premium amount. Families can expect to pay $2,000 to $3,000 a month just for monthly premiums and apart from expensive co-pays, co-insurance and $500-$1,000 in annual deductibles. Dental and vision plans cost extra.

Classroom sizes are in the 30s, infrastructure is decaying, special education and language support are lacking, and students are regularly committed to psychiatric assistance due to signs of mental illness. Students and parents in every community are aware of these issues. They have continually expressed their support for improving the education system and in each of the teachers' strikes, parents and students have joined educators on the picket lines and helped organize the strikes through social media.

While Fremont teachers are being told by the FUDTA that their struggle is only about their current contract and the narrow limits of their salary negotiations, there is a need to broaden the struggle to the broader issues of chronic underfunding of public education and to link up with the striking teachers in Oakland and other school districts in California and throughout the country.

To conduct such a struggle, Fremont teachers should establish rank-and-file committees independent of the unions and the Democratic Party in the schools, work sites and neighborhoods.

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