

Oakland teachers form rank-and-file strike committee as union keeps educators in the dark

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Click here to participate in the Oakland Rank-and-File Strike Committee Facebook group.

The strike of Oakland, California teachers continued on Tuesday as teachers went to their picket lines in the morning before holding a two-mile march from Verdese Carter Park to Roots International Academy in East Oakland.

To carry the struggle forward, Oakland teachers have announced the formation of a rank-and-file strike committee, independent of the pro-corporate unions and in opposition to all budget cuts, teacher layoffs, and school closures.

A statement announcing the formation of the strike committee declares, “Whatever agreement the unions reach behind closed doors will not address the issues for which we are striking. The OEA (Oakland Education Association) has already declared that it accepts the district’s insistence that any gain for teachers will be offset by cuts to school programs and school closures. It has refused to make the fight against budget cuts part of the strike.”

Oakland teachers, the statement continues, must oppose such a sellout and fight back. The rank-and-file strike committee “will be completely independent of the unions” and will “take up the fight for critical issues long abandoned by the unions, including opposing all budget cuts, teacher layoffs and school closings.” It will also be independent of both big business parties and fight for the demands that teachers and their students need, including full funding for public education, not what school authorities and the state Democrats claim they can afford.

The Oakland Rank-and-File Strike Committee Facebook group can be found here.

The need for teachers to take the conduct of the strike into their own hands is underscored by the role of the

OEA, which has kept teachers in the dark about negotiations while calling in political figures who bear responsibility for the crisis of education in California to help reach a sellout deal.

While a meeting of site representatives and OEA members before the strike overwhelmingly backed a “binding motion” requiring daily updates on negotiations, including proposals and counterproposals, the OEA bureaucracy has flagrantly violated this mandate.

For the second day in a row, the OEA’s evening press conference revealed nothing about the ongoing discussions. A critical comment by a teacher on the Facebook stream states, “These updates are not updates! What is going on????”

An email “update” sent out Monday included no information about the talks, while just offering empty platitudes, such as “Today was the best bargaining support rally we’ve ever seen! Your chants were DEAFENINGLY loud inside the conference room while we negotiated. So the whole team came downstairs and joined you. We could feel your power!”

The union treats teachers as nothing more than extras on a movie set whose pickets and marches supposedly strengthen union bargainers at the table. This is the same rhetoric United Teachers Los Angeles President Alex Caputo-Pearl used just before UTLA cut a backroom deal with the school district and Mayor Eric Garcetti, which betrayed the teachers’ fight for smaller classes, increased staffing and a halt to the expansion of charter schools.

Teachers must take this as a warning that OEA will violate the other parts of the above-mentioned mandate, including giving teachers 24 hours to review a proposed contract as well as a guarantee that teachers will not be forced back to work until a tentative agreement is approved by the membership. Just as UTLA did, the

union and school district will run roughshod over teachers' democratic rights to ram through a sellout if not opposed.

The most recent OEA proposal released Saturday calls for a 12 percent pay increase over three years, but on Monday OEA Vice President Ismael Armendariz refused to say whether negotiators were sticking to that demand. A 12 percent increase would still make Oakland teachers the third-lowest paid in the state. The school district has proposed a 7 percent pay raise over the same period and a one-time bonus of 1.5 percent.

Teachers are also demanding a reduction in class sizes and more support staff for students. The district is currently planning to vote Wednesday on cutting \$21.75 million from its 2019-2020 budget, which would only worsen conditions in the classroom. In addition, teachers are opposing mass school closures, as OUSD plans to shut down as many as 24 schools—or a third of the total—over the next five years.

Tuesday's two-mile march to Roots International Academy—the first school slated for closure after a near-unanimous school board vote in January—was a symbolic protest against the long distances students would have to travel in the event of mass closures. For many in Oakland, where poverty is widespread, even the cost of daily bus fare can prove prohibitive.

Teachers must assimilate the lessons from union sellout deals forced on teachers over the past year in Los Angeles, Denver, West Virginia, and other cities and states across the country. In each case, the unions have isolated educators, prevented joint struggles, and then rammed through contracts without any of the teachers' fundamental demands being addressed. In many states, including Oklahoma and Arizona, teachers are pressing for strike action again, just like West Virginia teachers did last week.

OEA officials have praised Democratic State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond for overseeing negotiations Monday. "Being that it wasn't going anywhere before and talks were ending, clearly his presence is helping," said OEA Vice President Chaz Garcia on Thurmond's role.

State Senator Nancy Skinner has also been invited by the unions to take part in the negotiations. In a tweet Monday, Skinner claimed to be addressing teachers' concerns over school funding and charter schools, writing, "Great to meet today with striking Oakland teachers at the state Capitol. We must increase funding for education in California! And I'm proud to co-author two charter school

reform bills in 2019."

Despite what the OEA says, Thurmond, Skinner and other Democrats are not friends of teachers and public education. Thurmond voted last year for Assembly Bill 1840, forcing Oakland to close schools to pay off debt. Skinner previously voted for a collective \$20 billion in education cuts in the 2008, 2009 and 2010 state budgets, which reduced California to one of the lowest-spending states per pupil in the country.

Skinner's two proposed reform bills, AB 1505 and AB 1508, are little more than window dressing for California Democrats, who have overseen the building of the largest number of charter schools in the nation. The bills would give more oversight to local authorities granting charters over these for-profit schools, which would supposedly reduce abuses and the negative impacts on communities like Oakland.

The statement of the rank-and-file strike committee outlines its demands, including:

1. No cuts, no closures! Full funding for public education by sharply increasing taxation of the giant corporations and the super-rich, and a reduction of taxes on working class families.
2. An immediate 30 percent increase in pay for all teachers and the reduction of class sizes to 18 for elementary school and 26 with an aide for middle and high school.
3. Take profit out of education! We demand a complete end to charter schools, which drain resources and students from traditional public schools, and the conversion of charters back into public schools.

The statement concludes by urging teachers to join the Oakland Rank-and-File Strike Committee today "to organize the independent strength of teachers, oppose any effort to shut down the struggle without meeting teachers' demands, and fight to mobilize the entire working class to defend the social right of students to a free and quality public education."



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