“We always have money for wars but not for public education”

Oakland teachers and students speak as strike reaches critical juncture

Our reporters
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Teachers, students and other workers expressed their determination to fight on the fifth day of the strike by 3,000 educators in Oakland, California. In conversations with reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site*, teachers and their supporters also expressed anger over being kept in the dark by the Oakland Education Association (OEA) about the union’s backroom negotiations with the school district authorities and state Democrats.

Supporters of the *WSWS Teacher Newsletter* distributed leaflets calling on teachers to join the newly formed Oakland Rank-and-File Strike Committee, to take the conduct of the strike out of the hands of the OEA and fight for the broadest mobilization of teachers and all workers to stop all budget cuts and school closures and fight for a 30 percent pay increase and full funding for public education.

Phong, an Oakland native, who has taught in the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) for nearly a decade, told reporters, “My job as a teacher pays me just enough to pay the rent, not including my car or bills or anything else, which is insane. I work two other jobs, including teaching classes at UC Davis (University of California-Davis), and work about 60 hours each week. No one should have to do that. The only thing that drives me is I love this environment and this group of students.”

He continued, “Many teachers in Oakland are forced to move into environments that aren’t safe, because they’re the only places where rent is affordable. And living in those environments, where there is gun violence and poverty, is not sustainable.”

Referring to the union’s demand for a paltry 12 percent raise over the next three years and rejection of any fight against budget cuts and school closures, Phong said, “I think that what OEA is advocating for is just not enough. Each year you’re increasing by four percent, that’s only like an extra $100 each month. To be completely honest, 12 percent is nothing.

“We should get median pay at least, to incentivize teachers coming back to teach in this environment where it’s not easy to teach. We need to pay teachers a fair rate, and 12 percent is not a fair rate.”

Rumi, an art teacher with a homemade costume that said, “WE ARE ANGRY,” spoke about the teacher retention crisis. “Not having enough support as a new teacher makes it very difficult to be here. The limit for an art classroom is 25 students per class but the district never honors it. In my first year I had 36 students in my tiny classroom, alongside getting low pay. I felt overwhelmed, and, it comes with not getting enough support, not enough counselors and all of that.

“I want to stay here. I love the kids and that’s why I am here, but give us what we need! We’re just asking for the basic needs for students and teachers.”

Jessie said, “The school district officials prefer to have young and unexperienced teaching staff that isn’t able to mobilize. They would like to be able to break strikes and that’s why we’re so susceptible to the charter school movement as well.

“Out of one side of their mouth the district will say we need more funding and out of the other side of their mouth they will spend that money on charter schools, taking money out of our school district.”

The WSWS also spoke to Emily, a young teacher in her first year, who said that in her division of the school a teacher in their third year is considered a “veteran” due to the high turnover. Emily spoke about her

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students—only a few years younger than she—and their view on the strike. “They definitely support the strike; the seniors are very knowledgeable about what’s going on. But, my freshmen too, are taking the bus across town to meet us for the strike.”

She continued, “My students recognize how the strike is related to other issues, including gentrification in Oakland. They get that there is unfair treatment. Going to school here [Oakland high school] they see the Piedmont schools right around the corner,” she said, referring to a wealthy city adjacent to Oakland.

Ahmed, a Yemeni student at Fremont High School, who has organized high school students to support teachers, said, “Teachers deserve way more than they get. California is a wealthy state; there’s no such thing as a budget deficit. Last year, they ended up with a $30 million surplus and now they claim there is a budget deficit. We always have money for wars but not for public education.”

Many teachers expressed enthusiasm for the WSWS’s call for a state and nation-wide strike. Cole, a history teacher said, “I definitely support a statewide strike and I think we need to march on the capitol next to demand that we have more funding for education in California.”

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