

Oakland teachers continue strike as Kentucky teachers launch statewide sickout

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As teachers in Oakland California begin their sixth day on strike, the wave of teachers struggles, begun in West Virginia a year ago, continues to expand across the United States.

A rally of hundreds of teachers, parents and students on Wednesday afternoon shut down an Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) board meeting, which had been scheduled to discuss implementing \$20.2 million in cuts to the 2019–2020 school budget. Despite the rain, the assembled parents and teachers held their ground for the afternoon, shutting down the meeting and preventing the intended budget cuts from being implemented.

Today, a group of teachers from San Francisco and Berkeley are initiating a wildcat sickout in support of Oakland teachers and will be joining them on the picket lines. They have organized themselves independently of the unions, which have refused to organize broader action in support of the Oakland teachers.

One of the organizers of the sickout, Lizzie, told the WSWS, “The reason I’m going out there is to show that their fight is our fight, to build this larger movement and to show teachers that it’s not just about the students in your classroom or your school, or even your district. All students everywhere are facing horrible learning conditions, and those are the same as our working conditions. That absolutely needs to change and quickly.

“It’s a funding problem and a capitalist problem... I think it can be easy to get stuck in the status quo and see it as a huge fight without a possibility for real change, but even sixty teachers can make a difference.”

Lizzie agreed with the WSWS that to defend public education it was urgent to organize rank-and-file committees of teachers across the state and nationwide, as the lessons of the prior teachers struggles

demonstrated that the Oakland Educators Association (OEA) would move rapidly to sell-out the teachers’ strike.

In Kentucky, teachers, acting independently of the union, have organized a statewide sickout in opposition to legislation attacking teachers’ pensions. On Wednesday night, it was announced that the two largest school districts in the state, Fayette County and Jefferson County, would be closed as a result, as over 40 percent of teachers reported sick.

The sickout was organized by KY 120 United. The unions have attempted to shut down the teachers’ wildcat. Brent McKim, president of the Jefferson County Teachers’ Union, stated that the union opposed the action and warned that teachers would face “termination.”

These struggles are a continuation of the fight of teachers over the past year, which began in West Virginia in a wildcat strike. That strike and all the subsequent struggles were shut down and sold out by the unions. None of the issues which drove teachers to strike—the drastic underfunding of public education, the charterization of schools, or the poverty wages of teachers—have been resolved. This is clearly expressed in the decision by West Virginia teachers to go back on strike last week and the discussions among educators in Arizona and Oklahoma about going on strike again.

The issues which teachers confront across the United States are shared ones. They face a bipartisan attack on public education and ruthless drive to transform schools into charters in the interests of the profit motives of a handful of billionaires. The forces attacking public education have a thought-through strategy. To fight back, teachers require their own, independent political strategy to defend public education.

Teachers in Oakland have formed a rank-and-file

strike committee to take their struggle out of the control of the unions and into their own hands. They are working to unite teachers in the Bay Area, throughout California, and across the United States in a common fight, turning to the broader working class for support.

The OUSD has claimed that it cannot grant the 12 percent pay raise over three years proposed by OEA, which itself barely keeps pace with inflation and would leave Oakland educators the third poorest paid major district in California. They have justified this with an older statement issued by the district's Financial Oversight Trustee, Chris Learned, who as a result of the terms of a 2003 bailout package exercises dictatorial oversight over all OUSD financial decisions. Learned stated that a 12 percent raise would cause the city "financial distress," and that he would veto any such agreement.

Over the course of years, as the bought-and-paid-for candidate of charter schools, Antwan Wilson, serving as head of the OUSD school board, squandered millions of dollars on consultants and fat paychecks for various executives, the trustees never once raised any outcry over the supposed financial distress of the district.

Now, however, as teachers' salaries are being discussed, Learned finds that Oakland cannot afford to grant its teachers a pittance of a raise.

Over the past several days, the OEA has promoted the illusion that the problems of school funding and of the contract negotiations could be resolved by appeal to the Democratic Party, which has overseen the attack on public education for years. In particular, they have urged teachers to direct their appeals to the new State Superintendent for Public Instruction, Tony Thurmond and California Governor Gavin Newsom.

Thurmond has been conducting bargaining mediation over the past three days, and the union has thanked him at every press conference and rally profusely for his unspecified efforts, which union president Keith Brown described as "being the adult in the room."

What the OEA has never mentioned is that Tony Thurmond is Chris Learned's direct supervisor. The threats of veto issued by Learned come from the office of Thurmond, whose election the union backed, and who they now present as a great savior. Thurmond told the *SF Chronicle* on Tuesday, "I'm not advocating one way or another for what their salary should be.

Obviously, I want to see our teachers well compensated [but] OUSD has well-documented financial limitations."

Newsom has a long history of intervening in strikes against the working class. In the 2013 BART strike, then Lt. Gov Newsom declared that the BART workers' pay raise demand was "unacceptable." In Los Angeles last month, along with LA mayor Eric Garcetti, Newsom intervened and helped the district and UTLA conclude a rotten deal that sent teachers back to work with the same pay raise that the district had offered them before they went on strike.

The CTA and the OEA backed Newsom's election campaign last year, but they were not alone in this. The Fisher family, the largest funders of charter schools in the country, were the third largest donors to his campaign. Through their Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), the Fisher family owns two charter schools in Oakland, and a network of 224 schools across the United States, with nearly 100,000 students. Any action taken by the new governor in the battle over public education in Oakland will be an attack on public schooling and gift to his charter school funders.

The OEA accepts the entire framework dictated by the ruling class and its Democratic Party representatives, only urging that budget cuts take place after a contract is pushed through. Second Vice President of the OEA, Chaz Garcia, stated that the discussion of cuts was "premature." During a site rep meeting in the week before the strike began, the union leadership refused to include budget cuts in its negotiations.

Teachers fighting to defend public education must be warned. The OEA is preparing to sell out the teachers. To carry forward the struggle, teachers should organize themselves independently, join the rank-and-files strike committee and turn to the broader working class in a united fight against austerity and the capitalist system.

For more information, visit wsws.org/teachers



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