

As Oakland strike enters seventh day, union keeps teachers in dark on negotiations

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Entering their seventh day on strike, 3,000 teachers in Oakland, California continue to fight to defend public education and secure a living wage. The Oakland Education Association (OEA), however, has kept its membership in the dark about negotiations, arranging behind their backs to secure a minimal pay raise by agreeing to cuts to the overall education budget of the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD).

Teachers in Oakland on Tuesday formed an independent rank-and-file strike committee to take control of the fight from the union leadership and place it in the hands of the teachers themselves. The committee is working to unite the rapidly emerging struggles of teachers throughout the state and the country, seeking support from the broader working class, to mount a genuine defense of public education.

The negotiations being conducted by the OEA are entirely premised on the acceptance of the parameters established by the slashed OUSD budget. While teachers are fighting to secure funding to rebuild their dilapidated schools, purchase necessary supplies, provide programs and services to their students, and a decent wage for teachers and staff, the union has accepted the confines of the existing budget. They are seeking to conclude their negotiations by arranging for the school board to cut other portions of the underfunded budget.

When parents and teachers mounted a successful picket of the school board scheduled on Wednesday evening to discuss \$20.2 million in cuts, shutting it down, OEA second Vice President Chaz Garcia stated at a press conference that talk of budget cuts was “premature.” Once the union had secured its terms, in other words, then it would be time to carry out budget cuts.

This point was made forcefully clear during a site rep meeting Thursday night, in which Ismael Armendariz, first Vice President of the OEA, stated that the breakthrough which the union bargaining team had

secured after eight days of negotiations was getting the OUSD to recognize that some of their “pet projects” could be cut from the school budget to fund the new contract.

Armendariz went further, responding to a question from a site rep, stating that the OUSD would continue to protest budget cut meetings, “unless we have received a TA [Tentative Agreement].” That is to say, once there was such an agreement, the OEA would no longer contest the budget cuts.

This is what the OEA is hiding from the striking teachers, who are not fighting to secure a pathetic raise—12 percent over three years, just over the rate of inflation—by agreeing to allow cuts to other portions of school funding. Even if the union secured its requested pay raise it would make Oakland the third poorest paid major district in California, and the cuts would deepen the crisis which their students confront.

Teachers at picket lines throughout Oakland have expressed anger and disappointment at the daily bargaining updates which they have received from the union. There is a widespread sentiment that the union is keeping the membership in the dark.

The so called “strike news updates” released by the OEA on its website or in emails sent to striking educators have not provided any information about the closed-door negotiations, but have rather been notifications on the locations of the daily rallies, weather updates, warnings to fight “misinformation” noting that the OEA site is “the only source for accurate information,” and a multitude of vapid commentary on the vigor of the pickets:

“WE ARE SO STRONG! Your solidarity and determination are wearing down OUSD. The bargaining team is inspired by your strength on the picket lines and energy in the streets. Keep holding strong!”

These non-updates are a flagrant violation of a motion passed with near unanimous vote at an OEA site rep

meeting held on Monday, February 18, three days before the beginning of the strike, which stated that the bargaining would engage in transparent negotiations, providing the membership with daily substantive updates. The motions passed in the meeting committed the union leadership to the following: they would give the membership 24 hours to discuss any new contract before voting, they would not send the membership back to work until they had approved a contract, and they would include the district's proposal to close 24 schools in their bargaining negotiations.

Keith Brown, president of the OEA, thanked the floor for their "recommendations." A member of the rank-and-file strike committee raised his voice and asked Brown if the measures passed by the site rep meeting were binding on the OEA bargaining team. Brown hesitated and then said yes, they were.

On Thursday night, Joseph, a member of the rank-and-file strike committee spoke at the first site rep meeting to be held since the strike began. Addressing first Vice President Armendariz, who was chairing the meeting, he asked, "The union has flagrantly violated the motion that they would supply daily, substantive updates. You have instead issued patronizing statements informing us that we are winning. My question is this: were the motions passed in our last meeting binding or not?"

"Do you want my personal opinion?" asked Armendariz. "No," Joseph replied, "I want to know if, as vice president of our union, you regard these measures as binding." "No, they are not," stated Armendariz.

Armendariz stated that despite the fact that the union leadership was choosing to directly disregard a unanimous vote of its site reps, that they would still give 24 hours to read the contract and would not send the teachers back to work prior to it being approved. The membership, he declared, should "trust" the leadership.

Any striking worker frustrated at the failures of their leadership, but who retain illusions in the possibility that the union can be reformed by democratic measures should draw the lesson of this exchange. When democracy stands in the way of the union leadership's agenda, it can be dispensed with a wave of the hand. A unanimous vote declared binding by the leadership can a week later be treated as a recommendation, and a week after that thrown out entirely.

At noon on Thursday, the striking teachers staged a rally in Frank Ogawa plaza in downtown Oakland. The numbers attending the rally were fewer than in previous days. Of particular significance, however, was the

presence of supporting teachers from San Francisco, Berkeley and a couple other neighboring communities. The sixty or so teachers who joined the rally from neighboring districts staged a sick-out, in defiance of both their school district and their unions which have not called sympathy strikes. Their presence, while slight in numbers, was an initial expression of the immense social weight the striking teachers possess if they succeed in uniting in a common struggle.

The greatest barrier, however, to such a unified fight is the unions themselves, which have isolated workers, restricting their struggles to a district-level fight and shutting down their strikes when there is a danger that a second strike will erupt. In this fashion, the unions have isolated and shut down strikes over the past year in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona, Seattle, Los Angeles and Denver. In none of these fights were any of the basic issues resolved. The attack on public education continues.

The teachers of Oakland, like their counterparts throughout the United States, are fighting to defend public education, to defend the right of their students to safe, quality schools, and to a future which is being stolen from them by budget cuts and privatizers.

The unions do not represent an alternative to budget cuts and the starvation of public education. In a state with 144 billionaires, and a country where the ruling class squanders trillions on bank bailouts, unending wars and brutal assaults on immigrants, the union operates entirely within the strangled budget of the OUSD.

To carry their struggle forward, the striking teachers need to organize independently, join the rank-and-file strike committee, and send delegations of workers to appeal to AC Transit workers, BART workers, port workers, UPS and Amazon workers, and other sections of the working class to join them in a common fight.



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