

“The unions are trying to divide the students and teachers”

Oakland students oppose sellout of teachers strike, plan to continue fight to defend public education

Genevieve Leigh, Kayla Costa
7 March 2019

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality calls on students throughout Oakland and beyond to hold meetings to discuss the way forward to defend public education. Contact the IYSSE to invite a representative to talk at your school or join at iysse.com.

There is growing anger among students and teachers in Oakland, California over the shutdown of the seven-day Oakland teachers strike by the Oakland Education Association (OEA). The union pushed through an agreement over widespread opposition that meets none of the teachers' demands and paves the way for an escalation of the assault on public education in the city.

The deal secures a measly 11 percent pay raise over four years, which does not even keep up with Bay Area inflation. It contains no changes to nurse-student ratios and a negligible reduction in class sizes. Furthermore, the deal was premised on \$22 million in cuts by the school board in a rotten quid pro quo that attempts to pit teachers against the students they serve.

Students are continuing to organize and prepare a fight back against this attack on public education. The *World Socialist Web Site Teacher Newsletter* and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, the youth and student wing of the Socialist Equality Party, spoke to students in the aftermath of the sellout about the political lessons from the experience and the way forward.

After hearing about the agreement, Brianna, a junior at Oakland High School, attended a very contentious school board meeting to voice her disapproval.

“We went to the school board meeting, and there were hundreds of teachers, students and parents who were all angry and upset. Many people were saying that we needed to start another strike. Most of my teachers were there

from my public health academy program.”

Brianna explained that the meeting organizers only allowed those who wanted to speak one minute at the microphone. “Us students wore red cloth around our mouths to signify their efforts to silence us.”

Brianna first became involved in the protests when she found out that the proposed budget cuts included funding for a student achievement program called Asian Pacific Islander students (API). Brianna and her peers began attending school board meetings to oppose the budget cuts. She told us that these experiences were often disheartening: “Most of the time we ended up upset by the end of these meetings because we felt that we were not being heard. As one of these programs which will be cut, it is very frustrating. We don't ask for much money for our program.”

Brianna explained that very quickly after she started attending the board meetings, teachers decided to go on strike: “We supported the teachers 100 percent during the strike. We really felt that they were doing this for not just for them, but for us too.”

Brianna is one of the many students who will be directly impacted by the budget cuts, passed on Monday by the school board, which the OEA endorsed. She expressed her distrust of the claim that there is no money, “My understanding is that they had to make some type of cut because they claim there isn't any money. But we know there is money! The question we are asking ourselves is: Where is it all?”

Like many other students, Brianna was disheartened by the ending of the strike: “Honestly, at first I was pretty angry at the teachers. I thought they were going to stand with us. I sat down afterwards to really think about it and

try to figure it out why some teachers would vote 'yes'." Brianna said after talking to the WSWs and IYSSE she understood that the rank-and-file teachers were not to blame.

She explained, "Now I think I understand a lot more. The teachers were under a lot of pressure by not getting paid and having the union tell them this was the best they could get. And I feel that they [the union and the school board] are trying to separate us and make us hate each other."

When asked what she would say to Oakland teachers if she had the chance she replied, "Isang Bagsak," and explained that the phrase is Tagalog. "It means, if one falls, we all fall, one rise, we all rise. The teachers need to see that the students are in this fight with them."

Brianna believes that her and her fellow students are not finished fighting. She explained that the students are trying to organize. "We want to have a student strike, but there is a lot we need to sort out still."

Another student, Samantha, a freshman, expressed similar sentiments about the outcome of the strike. She said that the "big question" the students all have is: "Where do we go from here as students? How do we take this forward?"

She went on, "From what I understand with the students, a lot of us would like to get involved more. When we protested at the school board meeting [Monday], we brought in a really big crowd with us. But then, after we were there for a bit, I know a lot of people were asking, 'What are they [the school board] talking about... How can we actually change this?' A lot of people started leaving in the middle. What we need is something to bring to students to explain and build off."

Samantha also spoke to us about their experience leading up to the strike: "We've talked about going to city council members and going to the state and county. We've met up with the city before. We wanted to work within the system to find money for the schools, but everywhere we go they say there's a budget crisis and no money."

Our reporters spoke to Samantha about the claim that there is no money. She agreed that this was a lie. "Money is the biggest problem in Oakland. The story we hear is that somebody in the district did something with the money, and then left, and now we are stuck with a mess. Even though we don't know what happened with it."

Samantha said she felt that the vote did not reflect what the teachers really wanted. "A lot of teachers didn't even vote. That's the crazy part. They [the OEA] held it on a

Sunday, and lot of them couldn't make it to the voting place. They were tired and didn't have much time. We could have been on strike to this day. I have been talking to other teachers and students still, and everyone feels like the OEA and the district were up to something."

Santos, a 16-year-old Sophomore at Oakland Tech, agreed about the role played by the OEA. "I feel that the from the beginning to the end the students and teachers were not informed very well about what was going on. The students sort of had an idea that the teachers wanted higher pay. Students were not showing up for the pickets, but only because they were not informed that the teachers were fighting for better conditions in the school."

Santos explained that it was not only the students who were not informed, but the teachers as well: "Through the strike I would speak to my teachers, and a lot of the responses showed that they didn't know what the current situation was. And I thought, 'Why don't they know?' It was clear that there wasn't a lot of communication between the union leaders and the teachers. I don't think I really know the important parts of the strike until it ended, and that was frustrating."

"At first, a lot of students felt that the teachers had betrayed the students by voting for the deal, since the only thing that was agreed on was a raise for the teachers. But I know that is not what actually happened. I feel that the media, the school board and the unions were misinforming people, and that the unions are trying to divide the students and teachers."

Santos echoed the sentiments of many other students we spoke to about carrying the fight forward. "We want to have a series of events led by students to show the unions and the school board that we are not going to be silenced." Santos agreed that the most critical aspect of the fight going forward is having a clear political perspective.

When asked about his own political views and his position on socialism he replied, "I think I need to learn more about socialism and capitalism. It is sort of gray area for me. But I do know that I think that there should be more things in this world that are centered toward helping people and meeting human need and not toward benefitting the corporations."



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