The betrayal of the Oakland teacher strike and the way forward for students

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality
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The International Youth and Students for Social Equality and the World Socialist Web Site Teachers Newsletter *is hosting an online call-in meeting tonight, March 7 at 7 p.m. Pacific to discuss the way forward in the fight to defend public education. To join visit* wsws.org/teachers.

This Sunday, the struggle of Oakland, California, teachers to defend public education was sold out. On Thursday, February 21, more than 3,000 educators went on strike in opposition to the threat of school closures, endless budget cuts, declining real wages, and impossible teaching conditions, which include large class sizes, dilapidated facilities, threadbare funding, and the hunger, poverty and even homelessness of the working-class families they serve.

Over the past four days, students have begun to wage their own campaign to save their schools. Many have taken to social media to denounce the contract and the devastating impacts the new cuts will have on their lives. “You failed us,” wrote one student speaking of the Oakland Education Association (OEA), “you pulled the rug out from our feet and disrupted our community’s momentum.”

Some students have expressed frustration with teachers for the “yes” vote. What is crucial for students to understand, however, is that *the OEA does not represent* teachers. The OEA is an anti-working-class organization, politically aligned with the Democratic Party, that has pushed through a rotten agreement over widespread opposition from teachers.

Teachers did not go on strike just for themselves; they were on strike for their students and for teachers all over the world who face the exact same condition: a relentless, corporate assault on public education.

However, the agreement ratified Sunday night did *nothing* to stop the corporate assault on education, nor did it address the low pay and terrible working conditions of teachers. On the contrary, it opens the door for a continued attack on our schools, while at the same time trying to demobilize the only force that can really stop this assault: the united power of students, teachers, and the entire working class.

The OEA abandoned two central demands of teachers: no more closures, no more cuts. And, in less than 24 hours of the contract’s ratification, $22 million of cuts have been imposed! Cuts to the nutrition of students, cuts to social justice programs, cuts to college preparation, cuts to critical social programs that students in this already broken system rely on.

Meanwhile, the teachers have gained nothing. A one-person reduction in class-size!? Nothing for school nurses or psychologists!? No promise to end school closures once and for all!? An 11 percent raise over four years – which *does not* keep up with Bay Area inflation.

The OEA presented this contract as a “historic” victory, but we all know this is a lie. It is one of the most miserable sell-out contracts ever, rammed through over widespread opposition among teachers.

Most teachers who voted “yes” did not do so because they liked the contract. Just like many who voted “no,” they despised it. However, after a week of minimal communication, no strike pay, rallies empty of serious discussion, and efforts by the union to prevent the strike from linking up with the dock workers and other school districts, teachers were browbeaten to believe that “nothing else could be accomplished” under the strike.

The question facing students now is: What way forward?

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality urges students to intensify their campaign in

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defense of your schools. This campaign, however, must be based on a clear political perspective.

First, students should reject all efforts to divide them from teachers. This is the aim and function of the OEA, which does not represent teachers, but rather highly privileged, upper middle-class functionaries. Outraged over the way the strike was conducted and its outcome, teachers have already begun to form independent rank-and-file committees to defend public education.

Second, the defense of public education is a struggle of the entire working class, of all races, genders and ethnicities. The claim by Democratic Party politicians and those groups that operate around them that the fundamental issue is race is aimed at blocking a united movement of all workers, whether they live in Oakland or West Virginia, and whatever their skin color happens to be. The attack on public education affects workers of all races, throughout the country and internationally.

Third, the struggle of students and workers to defend public education must be waged in opposition to both Democrats and Republicans. Both are parties of big business dedicated to the assault on public education. In California, Democrats are in control of all levers of political power, while the anti-public education policies of the Obama administration ("Race to the Top") paved the way for the Trump administration's war on schools and teachers.

Fourth, this is not a *local* struggle. Teachers and workers have been going on strike across the world this past year, in a strike wave that heralds a new epoch of working class struggle internationally. In Morocco, in Brazil, in Denmark, in Tunisia, in England, in Australia—teachers and other sections of the working class have begun to strike and protest, not just for education, but for social equality, for health care, to prevent climate change, and to end war.

Finally, the defense of public education requires a frontal assault on the wealth of the ruling class and the social and economic system it defends, capitalism.

In Oakland, the Oakland School Board told teachers that the "pie" of education is only so big, and that teachers, parents, and students have to fight over the crumbs at the table. The OEA says virtually the same thing: "Teachers, strikes don't have any power to change this, vote for the Democrats in Sacramento and Washington, D.C."

What they really mean is that they will do nothing to challenge the distribution of wealth and the political power of the capitalist ruling elite. There is supposedly no money for public education in a society in which three individuals have more wealth than the bottom 160 million people, and where the wealth of California's richest man—Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg— *is 3,000 times the budget deficit of the Oakland Unified School District.*

The fight for public education means a fight to establish a society based on social need, not private profit, in which the wealth produced by workers is owned and controlled democratically, and in which every individual has the right to an education, a decent job, a livable income, health care, a healthy environment, and access to culture.

This fight is not over!

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality calls on students throughout Oakland and beyond to hold meetings to discuss the way forward. Contact the IYSSE to invite a representative to talk at your school. Speak to your teachers and parents about the political issues involved in the fight to defend public education. Organize a mass meeting throughout the district to plan a fight back.

The IYSSE, the student organization of the Socialist Equality Party, will do everything in its power to help the growing movement of students and teachers in Oakland and unite them with students and teachers around the country and world for a genuine struggle to defend public education.

To join or contact the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, visit iysse.com

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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