

Sacramento, California teachers authorize strike

Dan Conway
20 March 2019

Last Friday, more than 92 percent of voting teachers in the Sacramento Unified School District in California's state capital voted to authorize a strike by the district's 2,500 teachers. The vote expresses the growing militancy of teachers who over the last year have engaged in the largest number of walkouts in decades, involving nearly a half million teachers, including more than 40,000 in Los Angeles and Oakland.

Teachers in Dublin, California, 23 miles east of Oakland, have also voted by 98 percent to strike in the suburban district, which serves 12,300 students. The 623 teachers, who have been working without a new contract for more than a year, are demanding improved wages, smaller class sizes, reduced workloads, additional counselors and more affordable healthcare.

The Sacramento City Teachers Association (SCTA), which conducted the vote, said a strike could be called if the district and the city "persist in their unlawful behavior and avoid taking measures to correct their unlawful behavior." The Sacramento City Unified School District serves approximately 40,000 students across 75 school sites.

The union did not set a date for a strike. If it is called it will likely not occur until April at the earliest as the SCTA has offered to meet with the district on either March 26 or March 28. Like other teacher unions, the SCTA has fully accepted the budgetary framework set by state Democrats who after decades of corporate tax cuts and school funding cuts, have left California 43rd in the nation for per pupil spending.

The unlawful behavior relates to the district's non-compliance with provisions of the November 2017 agreement with the district, according to SCTA President David Fisher. In that agreement, the union apparently agreed to accept cuts to health plans to fund

class size reductions and add additional school nurses and psychologists. The 2017 agreement also modestly increased teacher salaries.

In the wake of the strike authorization vote, union, district and city officials have scrambled to prevent any teacher walkout and to come to an agreement on even deeper school cuts. Sacramento mayor and former state senate president, Darrell Steinberg, a Democrat, declared, "today's strike vote by the Sacramento City Teachers Association compels us to urge the district and the union to resume negotiations and explore all options as soon as possible. *Sacrifices will have to be made.*" [emphasis added].

SCTA president Fisher has made it clear that the union has no intention of opposing this economic blackmail and essentially apologized for the vote, saying, "First of all, we hope not to go on strike. However, the membership voted to authorize it if necessary." The SCTA has already signaled its willingness to accept the planned layoff of more than 150 teachers and district personnel just as it did with health care cuts in 2017.

Sacramento teachers must draw the lessons from the recent Los Angeles and Oakland teacher strikes. In both cases, the chief obstacle to unify teachers and school employees throughout the district, the state and more broadly was the unions. Allied with the very same Democrats who are slashing budgets and promoting the expansion of for-profit charter schools, they isolated striking teachers, shut down the walkouts and agreed to deals that provided miniscule pay increases funded through further cuts and school closures.

If a fight is going to be taken up, Sacramento teachers must take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands by forming rank-and-file committees in every school and community. These committees should reach

out to the students, parents and the broadest sections of the working class, including University of California workers, Dublin teachers and others, to prepare a statewide strike to defend public education and living wages.

A special appeal for unity must be made to Sacramento school support staff to join any walkout and to defy the strikebreaking efforts of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), Teamsters, and United Professional Educators (UPE), which have already signaled their willingness to order their members to cross teacher picket lines.

This also means rejection the unions' efforts to encourage a fratricidal struggle between public school employees over the narrow resources the district and the state have made available.

Richard Owen, UPE Executive Director, denounced the strike vote by the teachers, saying, "We have 100 percent votes saying that's the silliest, most selfish thing you could possibly do to a district that's in these dire circumstances. For them to assume that we need to take care of our contract, and our contract only and to hell with all the other employees in the district."

Speaking like a business executive, SEIU Local 1021 Field Team Supervisor Ian Arnold denounced a potential teacher strike, saying, "it would be devastating to our students, devastating to our staff, and would really hurt the region. No company would want to relocate to a region where the schools are failing."

If the district faces the prospect of "failing," this is entirely due to a manufactured crisis. The Democrats, who control every lever of state government, from the governor's seat to both houses of the state legislature, have systematically starved the schools of funding. At the same time, they have provided endless tax giveaways to Silicon Valley tech giants, financial and real estate firms, energy monopolies, agribusinesses, aerospace and defense and other industries that dominate the state economy.

Now, California officials have given the Sacramento school district until June to fix a \$35 million budget deficit or face a potential state takeover. Such a takeover would lead to even more draconian budget cuts ordered by a state-appointed financial director who would essentially function as a dictator for wealthy bondholders who control the district's debts.

The situation facing the Sacramento school district

highlights the complete irreconcilability of the profit system with the needs of teachers and students. To put matters in perspective, the \$35 million deficit represents a mere 0.05 percent of the wealth owned by California's richest individual, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, whose net worth currently stands at \$63.5 billion.

It is estimated that the world's richest individual, Amazon's Jeff Bezos makes \$230,000 each minute. This means that Bezos makes the average American worker's annual salary of \$44,564 in about 12 seconds' time each day and the average Sacramento teacher salary of \$61,698 in about 15 seconds' time. In approximately two and half hours, Bezos would make an amount equal to the entire Sacramento district budget deficit.

There is more than enough money to fully fund education. But teachers, students and school workers face implacable foes in the Democratic Party and the trade union bureaucracy who do everything in their power to impose cuts and austerity. That is why Sacramento teachers must form their own rank-and-file committees to fight for what teachers and their students need, not what the corporate-controlled parties and unions say is affordable.

We urge all teachers, workers and students in Sacramento and throughout California to contact the World Socialist Web Site Teacher Newsletter and to take up this struggle today.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact