

After betrayal of Oakland teacher strike, district lays off hundreds, prepares school closures

Evan Blake
28 March 2019

The betrayal of the seven-day teacher strike by the Oakland Education Association (OEA) has opened the door for the school officials in Oakland, California to accelerate their assault on public education.

On March 4, the day after the strike officially ended, the school board enacted \$22 million in budget cuts, including \$1.1 million from services for disabled, homeless and foster care youth support as well as \$800,000 from music programs. Another \$3.6 million was cut from restorative justice programs for conflict mediation, \$1.3 million from nutrition for poor students, and \$2.9 million from college preparation programs. As part of the OEA's deal with the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD), the union agreed to help impose these cuts.

Roughly a week later, the district began to distribute layoff notices to 257 educators across the district, including teachers with strong performance reviews, as part of the \$22 million in budget cuts. Prior to the strike, the OEA adamantly refused to include teachers' steadfast opposition to budget cuts as one of its demands at the bargaining table, echoing the district's claims that this could not be included in collective bargaining.

A similar process has unfolded in Denver, Colorado, where over 220 positions have been cut to pay for a meager salary increase. Like their counterparts in Oakland, the Denver Classroom Teachers Association called the deal to end the strike an "historic victory."

Last Wednesday, the OUSD school board held another meeting, at which roughly 200 teachers, parents and community members protested. The school board voted to approve the "Citywide Plan," which envisions the closure or merger of 24 public schools over the next

five years, roughly one-third of all public schools in Oakland.

One of the key demands animating Oakland teachers during their strike was a universal hostility to the school board's long-standing plans to close public schools and convert them to charter schools. Last fall, the unveiling of the Citywide Plan provoked an outpouring of public anger across the city. Hundreds came to multiple school board meetings to denounce the plan, including a meeting in January at which Roots International Academy was officially merged with another school. This will lead to staff layoffs and force many students to attend other schools.

Seizing upon this popular hostility to school closures and charter schools, OEA claimed they were fighting to oppose both during the strike. Union officials even staged a march through deeply impoverished East Oakland neighborhoods, culminating in a rally outside Roots Academy. Within days, however, they released the tentative agreement, which contains a meaningless commitment from school board president Aimee Eng to recommend a non-binding resolution calling for a five-month pause in closures.

This resolution, along with a similar one placing an eight-month pause on the creation of new charter schools, were both passed by a margin of 6-1 on Wednesday, with only Jumoke Hinton Hodge voting against. Hodge is a right-wing figure who promotes charter schools from a racialist perspective, having received over \$100,000 in campaign contributions from pro-charter organizations in the 2016 school board elections. During the strike, she was caught on camera choking a Kindergarten teacher, an attack for which she received no punishment.

As it attempted to sell its deal to teachers, the OEA cynically claimed the delays on closures and charter school creation was part of the unmitigated victory it had won at the bargaining table. But last week's meeting at which the Citywide Plan was greenlit gives the lie to this charade. Despite the toothless resolutions, the school board is moving ahead with its plans for mass school closures and the conversion of more schools into charters.

At the state level, the OEA has promoted California Governor Gavin Newsom as a defender of public education, despite the fact that he received over \$300,000 in campaign contributions from pro-charter outfits.

The OEA is further promoting illusions that Newsom and State Superintendent Tony Thurmond will support a package of legislation meant to curtail charter schools in California, including bills that cap charter schools at their current level, impose strict limits on charter locations, and give districts more power to deny charter applications.

That the OEA presents Newsom and other state Democrats as defenders of public education exposes the fact that the union is hostile to any genuine struggle by educators to demand improved wages, school funding and classroom conditions. The Democratic Party has overseen the evisceration of public schools in California, as the state has plummeted from 1st to 43rd in per-pupil spending in recent decades. Under Newsom's Democratic predecessor, Jerry Brown, California opened the largest number of charter schools in the nation.

The sellout of the Oakland strike is part of a string of betrayed walkouts, in Los Angeles and Denver, and in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona and other states. In each case, the National Education Association (NEA), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and their state and local affiliates isolated embattled educators, shut down their strikes and then imposed deals entirely acceptable to the corporate and financial elites who have been looting the public school system.

The fight to provide free, high quality public education to all children requires a complete break with the Democrats as well as the Republicans, which both speak for Wall Street and are hostile to the interests of the working class.

What has transpired in Oakland highlights the vital

necessity for teachers and the working class more broadly to organize themselves independently of the unions, to carry out a genuine defense of public education. During the strike, Oakland teachers formed the Oakland Rank-and-File Strike Committee to carry out this struggle, winning the support of many teachers. This committee, which is now known as the Oakland Rank-and-File Committee to Defend Public Education, is working to unite Oakland educators with the broader working class, as well as with teachers in districts across California, the US and internationally.

The development of a unified struggle of educators and all workers must be connected to the fight against the capitalist system and for socialism, including the seizure of the vast personal fortunes of the super-rich who monopolize the wealth produced by the working class. Only in this way can society's resources be directed to vastly improve public education and eradicate poverty and social inequality.

We urge all those interested in getting involved to sign up for the *World Socialist Web Site Teacher Newsletter* and contact us today.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact