

Teachers strike in New Haven School District, Northern California

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On Monday, more than 600 teachers in the New Haven School District of Union City and South Hayward in Northern California went on strike demanding higher pay and increased funding for public education. The strike is part of the growing wave of teachers strikes across the United States and internationally.

The unions, headed by the National Educators Association (NEA) and the American Federation for Teachers (AFT), have done everything in their power over the past fifteen months to isolate each strike and shut it down before it could build into a broader movement. The California Teachers Association (CTA) is today carrying out a “Day of Action” in the state capital of Sacramento, attempting to channel the growing struggles of teachers and students behind appeals to the Democratic Party, which controls California state politics.

The striking teachers in the New Haven district confront the exorbitant costs of living in the Bay Area. A May 4 article in *Forbes* found that teachers across the US can afford fewer than half of currently listed homes in 76 percent of major American cities.

On the West Coast, which has among the highest costs of housing in the country, the situation is even more dire. According to the *Forbes* analysis, teachers in San Jose can afford less than 1 percent of available home listings, to cite only one example. Of those teachers who do own homes, however, many are forced to seek second and even third incomes to meet the cost of ownership. According to figures released by Airbnb, more than 45,000 teachers across the US act as hosts for the company. Hundreds of thousands more act as Uber or Lyft drivers or otherwise have some other sort of secondary jobs in the highly exploitative “gig economy.”

The cost of teaching is also exacerbated by continually declining benefits. A recent investigation by National Public Radio found that California teachers must pay for their own substitutes when on extended sick leave. This often amounts to upwards of half a teacher’s wages or higher in a given sick leave period. As a result of this vicious policy, teachers undergoing treatments for severe and even terminal illnesses such as those undergoing cancer treatments return to the classroom early and against doctors wishes in order to pay bills.

To make matters worse, many teachers, including those currently striking in the New Haven School District, are responsible for the entire cost of their health care premiums. New Haven teachers currently pay up to \$20,000 per year in premiums.

The New Haven teachers are receiving widespread support for their actions, echoing the widespread support for teachers and support staff in general.

Most schools only reported 15 to 20 percent of students showed up for class on Monday, the first day of the strike. Attendance declined even further on Tuesday. The district is only offering teachers a one percent raise in the first year along with a 0.5 percent raise for each additional \$1 million it receives in state funding. In other words, the California Teachers Association’s (CTA) day of action, meant to appeal to Sacramento politicians, is being largely mobilized on the framework laid out for teachers by the school districts themselves. The unions treat the teacher strikes as either something to be avoided entirely or demobilized as soon as possible in favor of vain appeals to capitalist politicians at the local, state or federal level.

In fact, the CTA and its associated local chapters are actively working to stop teachers from mobilizing a

broader fight. This is precisely why the Sacramento City Teachers Association (SCTA), called off a one-day strike only last Wednesday precisely because it would have joined Sacramento teachers in struggle with those of New Haven. Furthermore, SCTA president David Fisher announced that there were no plans to resume the strike on a later date.

In the case of Sacramento, a district that serves nearly 48,000 students with more than 6,000 teachers and support staff, the strike was called off immediately before the school board voted on a financial report for the 2019-2020 academic year. The Sacramento school district was threatened with takeover by the County Office of Education if it failed to address a projected \$72 million deficit while the union had called the one-day strike and a prior such event in April after the district failed on its promise to reduce class sizes in exchange for a reduction in teacher health benefits during the current contract. The SCTA has signaled in advance that it will not fight against any cuts in a new contract, especially after agreeing to significant concessions in the last.

To add insult to injury, the SCTA called off the latest strike after the school board was able to temporarily resolve its latest budget deficit, saving \$28 million through cuts and layoffs along with the use of reserve funding. The financial crisis is by no means over, however, with the board pledging to work with the union to achieve more savings before the final budget which must be submitted by June 30. Sacramento County Superintendent of Schools David Gordon expressed hope that the union and the district could agree on further cuts before the deadline. “I can’t tell you what to spend your money on, but show me what you’re willing to cut.”

Governor Gavin Newsom’s latest budget, the first of his administration set to pass next month, in fact enshrines many of the public education cuts made by his predecessor Jerry Brown. To the extent that he has advocated for more funding for public schools it has only been in support of regressive tax measures such as Los Angeles’ Measure EE which institutes a new parcel tax in exchange for a thoroughly inadequate increase in funding for the nation’s second largest school district.

Contract deadlines are looming at numerous school districts across the US, leading to the possibility of

more strikes in large cities such as Chicago and Los Angeles whose contract already comes up for renewal in 2020. Las Vegas area teachers already voted by 78 percent to authorize a strike potentially involving more than 20,000 Clark County School District teachers last week.

Over the past year, the unions shut down strike after strike on terms that resolved none of the problems confronting teachers and did nothing to address the crisis of public education. To fight to secure a well-funded public education for students and a living wage for teachers requires that the teachers unite their struggles by building rank-and-file committees independently of the unions for a statewide and nationwide strike.



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