

As teachers union abandons demands and calls in Democrats

New Haven, California teachers strike at a crossroads

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Entering their ninth day on the picket lines, striking teachers in California's New Haven Unified School District are at a crossroads. Having already curtailed their demands to the bare minimum of a salary increase at the rate of inflation, New Haven Teachers Association (NHTA) union officials are presently working with state Democrats to shut down the strike as soon as possible. Roughly 600 teachers are on strike in the district, which covers Union City and South Hayward, California and serves roughly 12,000 students.

The New Haven teachers strike is only the latest in a series of immense teachers strikes spanning the entire globe. In the US in the spring of 2018, teachers organized statewide walkouts in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona, independently of the teachers unions, which then came in to isolate and betray these immense struggles.

Internationally, already in 2019 teachers strikes involving tens or hundreds of thousands of educators have swept through Poland, Colombia, Argentina, Mexico, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Mali, Iran and other countries. The issues confronting New Haven teachers resemble those faced by educators worldwide, and the only resolution to the global assault on public education is a global counteroffensive by the international working class, and not the union's policy of isolated, district-by-district actions and appeals to the Democratic Party.

On Thursday afternoon, NHTA President Joe Ku'e Angeles gave a press conference in which he announced that Mary Nicely, the Chief of Staff of Democrat Tony Thurmond, California's State Superintendent of Public Instruction, began mediating

the contract negotiations on Thursday morning. Angeles also stated that the NHTA is calling upon members of the New Haven Board of Education to join the bargaining sessions and he praised a tweet from Democratic presidential candidate Kamala Harris in support of striking teachers.

New Haven teachers must reject Nicely's presence and the union's appeals to Democrats as a grave threat to their strike. During the seven-day strike by teachers in nearby Oakland, California, the Oakland Education Association (OEA) similarly invited Thurmond to join the closed-door bargaining sessions. OEA leadership kept secret from their members that upon entering the room, Thurmond insisted that the OEA reach whatever deal was necessary to end the strike as quickly as possible.

After publicly praising Thurmond as the "adult in the room," within less than a week the OEA had pushed through a miserable, sellout contract that addressed none of the central issues in the strike, and which was predicated on budget cuts exceeding \$22 million.

New Haven teachers must assimilate the lessons of the recent teachers strikes in California, Washington and across the US, and place no faith in Democratic Party politicians. No less than their Republican counterparts, the Democrats represent finance capital and are thoroughly hostile to the interests of the working class. Having dominated political life in California for over half a century, the Democrats bear direct political responsibility for the collapse of the state's educational system.

In Thursday's press conference, Angeles noted, "The district needs to have a little more movement towards us and, as you know from past updates, we've moved

very far from our original position.”

Indeed, in a matter of weeks the union has drastically climbed down from its initial demands for a 20 percent pay raise over two years, a \$1,500 retention stipend, and several other items. For the first week of the strike, the NHTA reduced their demands to simply a 10 percent raise over two years, and in the second week they lowered this single demand to the minimal cost of living adjustment (COLA) of 3.7 percent for the 2018-19 school year and 3.26 percent for the 2019-20 school year, which could be less than the rate of inflation in the exorbitant Bay Area.

The school district is facing no financial pressure whatsoever, but applying such pressure is the essential function of strike action in any industry. The strike was launched after the date at which school districts in California are required to report their daily attendance and it is the attendance numbers which determine the amount of funding to the districts. Thus, despite the fact that only 11 percent of students have attended classes during the strike, the district is able to report their yearly average prior to the strike and receive funding at inaccurately elevated levels. In fact, since they are not paying striking teachers’ salaries, the district’s finances improve with each day of the strike.

By contrast, teachers are losing roughly 0.55 percent of their annual pay each day on strike, which means they will have lost 4.95 percent of this year’s pay by the end of the day Friday. The NHTA, along with its parent organizations, the California Teachers Association (CTA) and National Education Association (NEA), are insisting that teachers will receive no strike pay from their vast bank accounts. In 2015, the CTA collected \$178 million in union dues, while the NEA collects double that annually.

The union leadership timed the strike to take place after the attendance reporting deadline. The teachers unions have demonstrated throughout the course of this struggle that they are not fighting organizations through which teachers can secure full funding for public education.

New Haven teachers must establish their own, independent rank-and-file strike committees at every school, to take control of the strike and forge links with teachers across California, the US and internationally. These committees will fight for the resources that all students need, not what the capitalist politicians claim

they can afford.

As Ginger, a volunteer in New Haven schools, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “I want our teachers to have all the resources they need to teach our kids. There’s always money somewhere and it’s a big lie that there isn’t enough for schools. I think there’s a big war on education and they want to keep people poor because education is how you can lift yourself up.”

Cynthia, a parent and volunteer for 30 years in the district, commented, “This district is like the rest of the country, the top one percent of the top one percent are the only ones getting raises. For everyone else, things are getting harder. I agree we need a statewide strike because the problems aren’t just local.”



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