

“What we need to do is storm Sacramento”

New Haven teachers speak on conditions

David Brown
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The strike of 600 teachers in the New Haven school district has lasted for nine days and is continuing into the weekend. The district has announced plans to cut nearly \$8 million from the budget involving layoffs, school closures, and class size increases. Teachers spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about the conditions they face including poor pay and understaffing and how that impacts the students.

Naheed, a teacher at Alvarado Elementary School, explained the impact that larger class sizes will have. “They’ve said they’re going to raise the class size in elementary school from 25 to 30,” she said. “They did that once before during the recession and it was horrible. With the smaller class sizes you could see your students every day in small groups, but with 30 kids, you’ll work closely with any particular student maybe three times a week.”

The district plans include laying off dozens of support staff, which will make difficult classroom environments even worse.

“A lot of our students are high-need and the district is planning on cutting some of the support staff,” said Naheed. “For one class at my school, 13 of the 25 students have experienced trauma in their past and you see some extreme behaviors like running out of the classroom or throwing things. We only have a psychologist for three days of the week and they work almost entirely on special education assessments, not counseling. Even then, they are overworked and assessments come in late. It’s supposed to take 60 days, but we had one student referred in the beginning of the year and they only determined he qualified for services just now in May. During that whole time the teacher and student got no support.”

A teacher on the picket line at James Logan High School who preferred to remain anonymous stated that he was upset at the various picket signs which had been prepared by the union, which claimed that the union was

fighting for students, or to reduce class sizes. “That is simply not true,” he said. “The demand which the union is presenting in bargaining is strictly limited to pay. Only by extended logic could you say that that is fighting for students, and it is not going to affect class sizes at all.”

“Working in special education is really tough,” explained Daisy Serrano, a Speech Language Pathologist at James Logan. “We really need a lot of support as professionals to work with students who have significant behavioral issues. Last year I got a concussion because I was head-butted by a student. And I’m not the only one. We have students with moderate to severe learning disabilities, and we need more training on how to work with these students. We do have one behaviorist here at the district, but I don’t know if that’s enough.”

Daisy is also concerned as a parent. “When the district says, ‘we’re here to serve our students and our community,’ being part of that community and trying to advocate for my son, it doesn’t feel that way. As a parent, I’m really struggling with the fact that we’re not even close to ending the strike.

“My son is in kindergarten, and I woke last night at 3 A.M. feeling really guilty because he’s missed 10 days of school. I’m getting a little upset about it, because he’s just learning to read, the basics of literacy, as well as the crucial fundamentals of math, and he’s missed 10 days of school.”

Debbie, a veteran English teacher at Logan High School with over 20 years of experience, highlighted how the district was trying to skip over their end of the year administrative problems. She spoke of the fact that high school students could not graduate without receiving a minimum 2.0 GPA and that the only individuals authorized to issue final grades for students were teachers.

The district, however, was going ahead and preparing to issue grades for students to circumvent the strike and was appealing to the California Department of Education to issue a special dispensation to authorize this illegal action.

Debbie stated that under the rubric being used by the district to issue final grades, using grades from earlier in the school year, several of her students, particularly those with special learning plans, who would otherwise graduate would be unable to do so.

“Two of my students,” she stated, “who have already received enrollment offers from four year universities would fail to graduate on these terms and would have their college admissions revoked.”

Despite all of the difficulties, teachers were amazed by how supportive parents and workers in the community were. “We watched the Oakland strike,” said Rebecca Schroder, who teaches sixth grade at Itliong-Vera Cruz Middle School, “and the amount of community support they had was inspiring. I was worried that we wouldn’t have that here because we didn’t have much build-up to the strike. But the community has been very supportive.”

She went on to detail the longstanding mistreatment of teachers in the district.

“I’ve been teaching in this district for 10 years, so I started out right after the 2008 crisis. The first year with a credential I could only get a job as a long-term sub. Then in the second year they finally hired me as a full teacher in April. The whole time I was doing the work of a regular teacher but getting paid only \$160 a day.

“In those years right after the crash there were always furloughs, but the worst part was getting a pink slip every year. Even tenured teachers would get pink slips. No one would know at the end of each school year whether they would have a job for the next.

“This isn’t just a local problem. What we need to do is storm Sacramento. That’s how we can get the funding we need. We’ve got to find a way to shake it out of the Governor.”



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