

San Diego teachers notified of looming pink slips and layoffs

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Just days before schools closed for the winter break, hundreds of teachers in the Sweetwater Union High School District (SUHSD) in San Diego, California were notified that mass layoffs are on the horizon and all educators who have been with the district for seven years or less can receive pink slips and lose their jobs at the end of the current academic year.

Newer teachers in the district are slated to receive a Reduction in Force (RIF) layoff notices, also known as “pink-slips” on March 15, 2020. These teachers will be able to carry out their jobs through the end of the current school year but will be told not to return the following year.

The district initially announced in late 2018 that it faced a multi-million dollar budget shortfall, a total deficit of approximately \$68 million. Investigations have pointed to millions of dollars missing under the former Director of Finance Doug Martens and Chief Financial Officer Karen Michel. Martens and Michel both mysteriously retired from the district months before the shortfall was made public.

According to a 2019-2020 Financial Status Report issued in December by SUHSD Chief Financial Officer, Jenny Salkeld, the district now faces a \$26 million shortfall for the 2020-2021 school year and projects that enrollment will decrease by approximately 400 students.

Despite the fact that the district has been mired in a series of ongoing fraud and mismanagement investigations over their accounting practices, the SUHSD with the assistance of the Sweetwater Education Association (SEA), plans to continue to push through drastic budget cuts in order to pay off its debt over the course of the next 2 school years. The continued cuts will guarantee not only the removal of jobs, but also vital programs and services.

Located in southwestern San Diego County, near the US-Mexico border, SUHSD is the largest secondary school

district in California with 34 schools—13 high, 11 middle, three charter, three alternative education, and four adult. It has more than 1,500 teachers, 40,000 students, and 22,000 adult learners. It serves some of the most vulnerable populations, including hundreds of students who cross on a daily basis to attend school in the US. Parents of children with special needs across the border in Tijuana work especially hard to ensure their children can access services in US schools.

With layoffs looming in the coming months, not only will newer teachers be affected with loss of livelihood and access to health benefits, the layoffs will result in an immense disruption to classes at the beginning of the school year. Remaining teachers will face higher class sizes, class schedules will be uncertain and chaotic for weeks and school sites will rely on substitute teachers to fill in for cut positions.

The information presented by Salkeld along with a seniority list, developed by the SUHSD and approved by the SEA teachers union, are the means by which teachers will be laid off *en masse*. While it is still unknown just how many teachers will receive pink slips in March, what is clear is that the SEA has accepted the austerity measures and layoffs, despite the fact that the entire budget shortfall is likely the result of fraud and negligence.

On November 12, 2019, all teachers in the district received a letter from the SUHSD Human Resources department informing them to verify their seniority by December 2, 2019 due to the “continued declining enrollment and the current budget outlook.”

At school sites across the district, SEA site representatives informed teachers that layoffs are imminent and reiterated the request from the district to ensure that each teacher double check the accuracy of their order and status on the letter sent by HR and as it is listed on the SEA seniority list.

SEA site representatives also told teachers to respond to these conditions by wearing red on Wednesdays to show unity, writing letters of discontent to the school board, and showing up at board meetings. Rather than waging a fight against layoffs and budget cuts, it offers teachers an avenue to let out steam while fundamentally accepting the austerity.

Angered by the constant cuts from SUHSD and inaction by SEA, teachers are beginning to speak out independently of the Union in defense of their jobs and the future of education. On December 18, a group of teachers within the district sent out a statement via email to a list of newer teachers entitled “No Pink Slips, No Cuts.” The statement revealed sentiment to fight and called out the inaction of the SEA in defending education jobs. The statement described the group’s decision to use the “mornings or after school to picket,” with signs that list their demands like “No Pink Slips, No cuts to education, etc.,” to have “negotiations between the union and the district live streamed,” and for teachers to wear pink on Wednesdays showing who has been deemed replaceable. Most importantly, the statement made an appeal to teachers to unite “with parents and working people in [their] community.”

This initial independent organization is a sign that teachers are fed up with the current conditions within the district and complacency of the trade union and want to wage a real fight to protect their jobs and the future of public education.

The SEA Seniority List is a clear indication of the union’s unwillingness to defend teachers’ jobs with the district. The function of this list not only reveals who is set to be laid off in times of financial distress, but it also serves to place teachers in opposition to one another, obfuscating the true nature of the role of the SEA and its capitulation to the district. Older teachers are deemed “safe” from layoffs and newer teachers are advised to make themselves more marketable by having multiple credentials or running various clubs and extracurricular activities at their school site.

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In addition to layoffs, upcoming cuts will include all high school students losing their access to laptops for the 2020-2021 school year, the possibility of teachers facing additional furlough days, and continued cuts to Learning Centers and Special Education departments throughout the district.

Millions in cuts have already been pushed through by

the SUHSD with the full complicity of the SEA. Since October 2018, layoffs and closures at the adult schools within the district have already taken place, as well as an end to credit recovery for students and cuts to after-school programs such as tutoring at many school sites. Multiple career technical education and extra support teachers, known as curriculum intervention specialists, have been terminated.

In addition, 30 bus stops were eliminated, requiring many students to walk miles to school through high traffic areas. At the beginning of the current academic year, the district refused laptops to the entire senior class preventing effective use of technology in the classrooms..

Under pressure from the district and union, about 300 older, higher-paid teachers took Supplemental Early Retirement (SERP) agreements and resigned by the end of the 2018-2019 school year. Multiple furlough days have been taken by staff, teachers and site administrators. Approximately 90 administrators received pink slips in March 2019, only some of whom regained a position within the district. In May of 2019 the district eliminated 82 positions including bus drivers, custodians, office staff, IT technicians, and Special Education instructional assistants among others.

The conditions faced by Sweetwater teachers and students are hardly unique. Decades of austerity and union-backed concessions have caused teachers in the US and internationally to fight back. From Poland to Mexico, China, Iraq, and in the US, educators have attempted to wage a fight, demanding an end to austerity. Across California, teachers struck this past year in Los Angeles, Oakland and New Haven.

These struggles so far have been isolated in one district after another by the National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers, leading to the imposition of austerity. To defend education, teachers must continue to organize groups independently of the trade unions, which are bound to the Democratic party which has been no less ruthless than the Republicans in attacking public education.



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