

Rank-and-file teachers in San Diego County initiate fight against layoffs and school cuts

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13 January 2020

Just before the Winter Break teachers in San Diego at both the San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) and Sweetwater Unified High School District (SUHSD) were notified of looming layoff notices, which district officials claim are needed to make up for \$70 million and \$26 million respective budget shortfalls for the 2020-2021 school year.

SDUSD employs roughly 10,400 full-time staff and enrolls about 103,000 students at 113 elementary schools, 24 middle schools, four atypical schools, 10 alternative schools, 27 high schools and 25 charter schools. SUHSD, which is also part of San Diego County, is the largest secondary school district in California with 34 schools and 1,500 teachers. The district teaches 40,000 students and 22,000 adult learners.

Running along California's US-Mexico border, these districts serve some of the most vulnerable populations, including thousands of students who cross daily 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.

The issuing of pink slips to hundreds of teachers will have a devastating impact on the quality of education in these two San Diego school districts. The layoffs, which are expected to come in March, will not only strip newer teachers of their livelihoods and access to vital health benefits. With schools already understaffed, the layoffs will further undermine learning conditions for thousands of students.

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. In addition, special education departments will take the brunt of the budget cuts and

will be forced to operate without the minimum staff legally mandated for safety, let alone optimal learning.

Cuts to Sweetwater Unified High School District (SUHSD) have already resulted in the closure of adult schools, layoffs of bus drivers and closure of bus routes, as well as early retirement pushed on educators who were under the assumption that the jobs of their young coworkers would be spared.

This is not the first set of layoffs to hit San Diego County schools. In 2017, SDUSD issued 1,500 pink slips to counselors, library clerks, custodians, art instructors, food service workers and occupational therapy specialists. Teachers, students, parents and community members flooded board meetings to oppose the layoffs. Their pleas, however, fell on deaf ears and the board voted 5-0 to proceed with the layoffs. Officials from the San Diego Education Association (SDEA) did not lift a finger to fight the layoffs, saying instead that their jobs were to "make sure that everyone is being laid off properly."

Once again, the SDEA and the Sweetwater Education Association (SEA) have made it clear that they will do nothing to oppose the layoffs. That is why a group of Sweetwater teachers have called for the formation of rank-and-file committees to mobilize parents, students and broader sections of workers throughout the county and the state to fight the layoffs. The teachers have called for protests outside of the schools to draw attention to their fight.

The SDUSD layoffs have been announced despite recent revelations that the district possesses a massive educator shortage in the area of special education for teachers and aides that serve students with disabilities. Halfway into the school year 100 vacancies for aides and about half a dozen vacancies for teachers who are qualified to work with students with moderate or severe

disabilities in SDUSD remain unfilled. The large class sizes put the safety of students and educators at risk.

The assault on public education is a bipartisan policy. San Diego's mayor is a Republican while the city's southern suburbs, including Sweetwater, are largely run by the Democratic Party. Governor Newsom and his predecessor Jerry Brown, who oversaw the largest growth of the charter school industry in the nation, are Democrats.

Since 2008, over \$8 billion in funding has been slashed from California's public education and community colleges, and another \$2 billion from its higher education institutions. This has been carried out under the leadership of the Democratic Party, which has relied on the California Teachers Association and the National Education Association to crush opposition by teachers, parents and students.

Every politician—whether it is Trump, his predecessor Obama, Governor Newsom or local school district officials—claim there is no money for decent salaries or sufficient school funding. Meanwhile, they have squandered trillions on tax cuts, Wall Street bailouts, the brutalization of immigrants and Trump's recent \$738 billion military war budget, passed with Democratic Party support.

California, which would be the fifth richest economy in the world if it were a separate nation, is home to Silicon Valley, Hollywood and the largest concentration of billionaires in the US. San Diego is also the principal home port of the US Navy's Pacific Fleet. The cost of a single aircraft carrier is \$13 billion and the total costs of the developing Nimitz class of carriers was \$37.3 billion, enough to hire 462,000 teachers and pay them an \$80,000 annual salary.

Yet countless districts in California, like the rest of the country, are facing massive budget cuts and teachers in Los Angeles, Sacramento and Oakland were forced to strike last year to defend their jobs and oppose budget cuts and school closures. Although the striking teachers won overwhelming support from parents, students and workers, the American Federation of Teachers, the National Education Association and their state and local affiliates isolated the strikes and imposed the austerity contracts dictated by Democratic officials and the wealthy school privatizers behind them.

The defense of public education and a vast

improvement of the conditions of teachers and students will only be accomplished through a vast redistribution of society's wealth from the top to the bottom. This will require a direct assault on the private fortunes of the financial and corporate aristocracy, which rules America.



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