

Oakland Education Association attempts to defuse anger over reckless return to schools

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Oakland teachers returned from spring break this week to find no significant preparations for a return to in-person instruction in place. With students expected to return to classrooms on Monday, there is growing anger among teachers over the unsafe and rushed plans pursued by the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) and Oakland Education Association (OEA). Basic issues like work schedules and precisely which students are returning were left up in the air and have been determined haphazardly on a site-by-site basis this week.

With signs of a new surge of COVID-19 developing in California, the OEA executive board has cynically put a vote of “no confidence” in OUSD before its membership. This is a diversionary tactic, which was also employed by the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) in February as they pushed through their miserable deal to reopen the third-largest district in the US. Instead of organizing any resistance to the unsafe reopening of schools, the OEA has declared an impasse in negotiations and called for a state mediator to rule on the issues of work schedules, special education workload, accommodations and leaves.

In order to mount a genuine fight against in-person instruction before the pandemic is contained, and to secure high quality remote instruction and social services, Oakland educators, parents and students must organize opposition to the OEA, which pushed the sellout agreement.

The Northern California Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee— established last December to unite workers throughout the region to oppose school reopenings and the herd immunity policies of the ruling elites—must be built in every school and neighborhood as genuinely democratic, fighting organizations controlled by rank-and-file workers themselves. Educators and workers throughout the region should register to attend our meeting at 2 p.m. PDT this Saturday, April 17, and invite your coworkers and friends.

Last month, the OEA browbeat teachers into narrowly approving a tentative agreement (TA) to force them back to school sites while dropping many essential safety demands. Teachers had consistently demanded that reopening be tied

to an actual drop in the community rate of transmission. However, the union bargaining committee and executive board decided to drop that demand and insist on a hard April 14 return to school sites for all teachers, followed by an April 19 return for elementary schools, as well as homeless students and those furthest behind academically from other grades, regardless of the state of the pandemic.

Basic elements of any approach to reopening concerned with community safety and academic progress were absent from the TA. Instead, according to a letter from the OEA to OUSD Superintendent Kyla Johnson-Trammell, they only negotiated “Reopening Dates, Safety Measures, and Stipends” (capitalizations in original). The “safety measures” amounted to nothing more than the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines, which have allowed the virus to spread rapidly in schools across Michigan, the leading factor behind the deepening surge of the pandemic throughout the state.

Ignoring the plain language of the TA, OEA told teachers that the district would give them their hearts’ desires in future negotiations. Despite the fact that section IV.2 stated, “All unit members shall return for in person instruction on April 14, 2021,” the union leadership maintained the fiction that teachers would be able to continue teaching remotely from home.

OEA first vice president Ismael Armendariz told teachers, “I can’t see why they would want you on site to teach remotely.” Armendariz further claimed that it wasn’t a problem that they dropped any connection between school openings and community transmission, because by April 19 the county “would be in the orange tier,” with lower case rates.

Before the vote on the TA, which ended on March 21, OEA second vice president Chastity Garcia claimed the union would “negotiate leaves for teachers uncomfortable returning.” She then tried to bully teachers into accepting the deal, claiming “if we vote no, we lose all of our leverage because we’d no longer be bargaining in good faith over these issues.” In other words, the union leadership would not

fight for any teacher demands if they voted no on the TA.

Despite the browbeating from union leaders, teachers expressed deep concern over the continued spread of the pandemic, the heightened workload of hybrid education, and a complete lack of confidence in the district's supposed "safety measures." The TA passed by a narrow margin of 56 percent in favor to 44 percent against. About 78 percent of all teachers participated in the vote, meaning that less than half of OEA members actually approved the TA.

After the TA passed, the union praised the deal to the sky to teachers and parents. OEA sent an email to teachers on March 21, claiming they had "ratified an agreement based on science and safety." Garcia was quoted in the email saying, "we can't wait to open up our schools safely."

Now that teachers and parents have seen the actual proposed hybrid schedule, no one is satisfied. Students whose families opted-in to in-person learning will only receive two hours twice a week of in-person instruction, requiring working parents to bring their children in only to pick them up two hours later. Teachers who had worked hard to establish remote routines, including special education teachers who established recurring small groups, are now forced to throw out their work and build an entirely new curriculum for the last six weeks of school.

Teachers who wanted to finally reach students who were not showing up to online instruction now confront bureaucratic hurdles. Only students whose parents confirm they are going to return in-person are being allowed back, but most students with high absences during remote learning are precisely those that teachers have difficulty reaching, meaning many of the highest need students are being left with even less access to education.

In this context, the OEA's call for a vote of "no confidence" in the district's plan and declaration of impasse are only cynical maneuvers that will do nothing to halt the disastrous resumption of in-person instruction. In the letter declaring impasse, OEA president Keith Brown states, "We anticipate many more educators and students to return next week."

The situation confronting teachers in Oakland and across the country is dire. A fourth surge of the COVID-19 pandemic has already taken hold, driven by the emergence of more transmissible variants and the careless reopening of schools and businesses. In Michigan, the daily rate of new infections is now higher than its winter peak, despite a quarter of Michiganders being fully vaccinated. For the past seven weeks, K-12 schools were the number one source of outbreaks in Michigan, but Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer has refused to order school closures.

In California, after case rates began dropping, county after county moved out of the purple tier with most now in the

less severe red and orange tiers allowing in-person dining, retail stores, and amusement parks to reopen. Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom has all but declared the pandemic over, with plans to scrap the tier system entirely and fully reopen the state by June 15.

Over the past two weeks, the average number of daily new cases has risen 20 percent, from a low of 2,588 on March 31 to 3,095 on April 15. All of the main COVID-19 variants of concern are present in California, from the B.1.1.7 UK variant, which is driving the surge in Michigan, to the P.1 Brazilian variant. Researchers at Stanford recently identified several cases of the "double mutant" strain responsible for the current spike of cases in India.

The OEA, like its pseudo-left allies in the CTU and the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA), has made it abundantly clear that it is beholden to the Democratic Party and the capitalist system, and will do nothing to protect the health and lives of educators students, parents and the broader community.

It is imperative that rank-and-file educators and all workers take matters into their own hands, through the building of networks of rank-and-file action committees in every school, workplace and neighborhood. These committees must fight for the closure of all schools and nonessential workplaces until the pandemic is contained, while demanding that the vast wealth of the financial oligarchy be used to provide the social needs of the working class, including high quality remote learning, health care and other services.

There is enormous opposition in the working class to the policies of "social murder" pursued by the ruling elites in the US and globally. The development of a counteroffensive in Oakland would have powerful ramifications internationally, and would coincide with an ongoing strike by miners in Alabama, nurses in Massachusetts, steelworkers in Pennsylvania, and Columbia University graduate students in New York City.

We urge all educators, parents and students in Oakland to join and help build the Northern California Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and attend our meeting tomorrow to prepare the broadest possible struggle to keep schools closed and save lives in Oakland, throughout Northern California and beyond.



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