

SEIU calls off Sacramento school strike at last minute, allowing all schools to reopen

Jonathan Burleigh
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Tuesday evening, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1021 called off its planned two-day strike at Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD) which had been set to begin Thursday. Over 90 percent of the 1,900 classified staff in SEIU 1021, including bus drivers, custodians, food service workers, instructional aides, clerks, and others had voted in favor of the strike, demanding greater personal protective equipment (PPE) and accommodations for workers with young children at home.

SCUSD had begun allowing elementary school students to return to in-person instruction on April 8, and April 22 was set as the day for middle and high school students to return. Districts across California have been reopening school sites on very short notice in order to avoid financial penalties from the state government under Assembly Bill 86 (AB86), which reduces districts' funding for every day they remain in distance learning after April 1.

The Sacramento City Teachers Association (SCTA) only signed a memorandum of understanding on reopening with SCUSD on March 20, less than three weeks before students were to return. The Oakland Education Association (OEA) and United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) both reached tentative agreements with their respective districts on March 21, for a return to in-person instruction on April 19, with some cohorts starting earlier. The rush of chaotic reopenings has left basic issues of scheduling, class lists, and staffing to be worked out on an ad-hoc, school-by-school basis.

California's chronically underfunded schools have struggled with large class sizes, dilapidated facilities and overworked support staff for decades. Unsurprisingly, district and union demands to resume in-person instruction with rigid cohorts and an

intensified cleaning schedule has brought out opposition among school staff. With less than two months left in the school year, scrapping the current distance learning plans and building new hybrid education models and work schedules from scratch is disastrous for public health, academics and family life.

Staff members who expected school sites to remain closed through the end of the school year now have to scramble for child care. Some, doubting the districts would risk student lives before the pandemic was contained, moved away to be with family while they could work remotely and are now being forced to move back with little notice.

After the overwhelming support to authorize a strike, SEIU 1021 initially called a limited two-day strike for April 22 and 23. School staff received support from rank-and-file teachers who pressured SCTA into preparing a sympathy strike. In the face of this growing determination of educators to struggle, the SEIU called off the strike at the last minute.

State mediation for a new tentative agreement (TA) has left basic issues unresolved. Instead of accommodations for child care, the TA allows school staff to bring their children to work if there is room at the site, with the parent signing a liability waiver. The TA includes one-time bonuses of up to \$2,250 which are meant as bribes to pressure workers facing financial insecurity to return to deadly conditions. There are no additional opportunities for work leave except those already existing before the pandemic.

Further, the deal makes no new demands for school staffing despite the sharply increased workload of custodial staff, bus drivers and others. The TA only asks that the district follow AB86, which calls for 10 percent of its additional funding to be for paraprofessionals to supplement instruction. School

staff and teachers in Sacramento are not alone in facing these issues, but broad sections of workers in California and throughout the US are being consciously isolated by the unions.

In Oakland, teachers who were angry after the OEA promised them additional accommodations and better work schedules voted over 95 percent for a “no-confidence” motion in the district’s reopening plans on April 16. Teachers’ major concerns included a lack of work accommodations, inadequate janitorial staff and intensified work schedules with less prep time.

After carrying out this stunt “no confidence” vote to try to dissipate anger among rank-and-file educators, the OEA executive board and bargaining team regained their full confidence in the district just two days later with a supplemental TA leaving important issues unresolved. The supplemental TA provides no new accommodations, no defense of prep time, and just a \$200 per week stipend for the increased workload of special day class teachers.

Regarding custodial staffing, the OEA released a statement of bureaucratic indifference, claiming they “cannot bargain for other labor unions,” as if teachers have no interest in whether there are enough janitors to disinfect during a pandemic and remove long-lasting rat infestations. According to EdJoin, the main job postings web site for school districts in California, there are currently 1,605 openings statewide for custodial, facilities and maintenance staff.

Across the country, education workers have confronted the persistent effort of the unions to keep them isolated and prevent workers from enforcing a coherent state- and nation-wide policy for containing the pandemic. The rush to throw open California’s schools brought on by AB86 was praised by the California Teachers Association and California Federation of Teachers. In doing so, they followed the line of the National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers (AFT), which have played the most critical role in implementing President Biden’s mandate to resume in-person instruction at the majority of all schools within his first 100 days in office.

AFT President Randi Weingarten recently endorsed the CDC’s reduction of social distancing in schools from six feet to three feet and proclaimed, “We’re not going to fight to keep schools closed.” This disastrous

policy of the unions and both big business parties has led to a renewed surge in the pandemic. In Michigan, where the rate of new daily cases recently reached its highest level yet due to the now-dominant B.1.1.7. variant, K-12 schools have been the number one source of new outbreaks .

A pandemic cannot be contained through local measures and rotten deals district-by-district or school-by-school. In order to contain and eradicate the disease, workers need to break out of the union straitjacket. The more that COVID-19 is allowed to spread in any location, the more likely that new dangerous variants will escape vaccines and drive new surges where transmission is currently low.

Since its formation last December, the Northern California Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee has fought to oppose the unsafe reopening of schools. We urge all school staff, teachers, parents and students in Sacramento and throughout the region to join and help build this committee today .



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