

“I’ve never been this afraid for my students”

Students and teachers in Oakland, California, speak on planned strike against unsafe schools

Gabriel Black
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The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) encourages high school youth to contact us today to organize opposition to the deadly school reopening.

Over 1,200 students in the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD), located in the San Francisco Bay Area, have pledged to strike this coming Tuesday as part of a growing wave of wildcat rebellions of teachers and students opposed to the deadly reopening of schools.

OUSD met with student leaders Friday to tell them that they had purchased N95 masks and outdoor seating area structures, two of the demands of the petition. The Oakland Student Strike Twitter and Instagram page, however, released a statement which declared, “students will strike starting Tuesday, January 18th, because schools are still not safe without COVID testing.”

Striking Oakland students will join tens of thousands of teachers and students from Chicago, Portland, New York City, Los Angeles, Massachusetts and recently France, in taking a stand against the policy of mass infection and herd immunity that is being shoved onto families. Millions of students, teachers and families worldwide are opposed to the policy, promoted by the Biden administration and other capitalist governments, based on the insistence that workers must learn to “live with the virus.”

The fact that thousands of people are dying daily of the virus in the United States is a matter of indifference to the Democratic and Republican parties, as both serve the banks and corporations that demand that nothing be done to stop the spread of the virus that interferes with corporate profits.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to dozens of Oakland students and teachers at a mass meeting Wednesday, urging them to attend the upcoming meeting of the West Coast Rank-and-File Safety Committee on Sunday at noon. The WSWS also conducted interviews with Oakland student leaders and teachers.

Nick, a student at Skyline High School, described conditions in his school. “We have 20-plus teachers out because of the pandemic at the moment. And most of the classrooms are half empty, and when they aren’t, it’s very uncomfortable. We are missing substitutes, so the teachers that aren’t sick have to sub more classes.”

Asked if he thought his school was a healthy learning environment, Nick said, “No. As much as I want to say ‘yes,’ it’s a no. We don’t have proper masks. We barely have enough cleaning supplies. And we don’t make enough room for students to socially distance themselves *at all*. We are put back in the system we were in before and it’s still (excuse my language) s**t. ... We don’t have temperature checks,

which I think is more than needed...”

“[School] right now still isn’t safe. As much as I love coming to school and seeing my friends and teachers, it isn’t worth it.”

Nick added, “Most of my friends at the moment are sick at home or at home because their families are sick.”

Blue is a student at Fremont High School in OUSD. Students at Fremont staged a sickout Wednesday and have played a leading role in the now 1,200 student-strong petition to strike next week.

Blue told the WSWS that the district should have implemented basic safety measures long ago. Now, they said “the situation is so hard because so many COVID cases are rising. We see all our friends being pulled out of class, and then we get an email a few hours later or sometimes a few minutes later even saying that we’ve been in contact with someone with COVID.”

Blue emphasized that the sickouts and protests were student-led and denounced efforts in the mainstream media, most recently the far-right publication Breitbart, to discredit the students by claiming they were puppets of teachers.

“It’s very upsetting that they think we don’t have the intellectual capacity to understand concepts of what’s affecting us,” Blue said.

Blue sharply criticized the attitude being promoted by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Rochelle Walensky that the killing of people who are “unwell to begin with” by COVID-19 is “encouraging news.”

“I have seen a lot of arguments that say, ‘well, only people with illnesses and disabilities are dying,’ and I’ve said this many times. This is straight up eugenics, and it’s disgusting. If you use that argument, you’re a monster. You’re using the same arguments Nazis have used in the past. ‘She was already dying, and I just sped up the process of being murdered.’ You have to be very cold-blooded to use that argument. One of those people is my baby sister. You’re saying my baby sister deserves to die.”

The student explained more about their sister who was struck with COVID during the holidays.

“My baby sister is premature, she is tube fed, has weak lungs and a weak heart. We took her to the hospital, but they said they could not take her because she wasn’t sick enough and there were so many kids and babies sick from COVID that they didn’t have any more room for her and couldn’t take her in. Luckily, she got better, but she could have very easily died. It’s not the hospital’s fault. I would never blame the hospitals, but who is at fault are the people who are spreading COVID and [the] people in power that don’t want to help us.”

The WSWS also spoke to Thomas, a teacher in OUSD.

I've been teaching for 15 years in different countries and states. I've never had two weeks like this. I've never been more afraid for my students. This is the first time I've gone to work legitimately scared.

Speaking to my students today, I don't think anything is being hidden from them. They see how poorly things are going this month. Grade school kids are naïve, because of their age, but middle and high schools they know it, they get what's happening.

I got directly exposed on Monday from one of my students whom I'm working directly with. He asked if I had to quarantine for 10 days and stay home. No, the policy is I have to go to school until I see symptoms. It just doesn't make sense. It doesn't match to any medical advice for any virus.

Thomas explained that most students "don't have the right mask" and that teachers cannot ventilate their classrooms because the air quality is frequently poor in Oakland.

Our district is not giving us any support. Our school board this summer, during the pandemic, getting ready to return to in-person instruction in August, they didn't even meet! They had no meetings this summer.

Pretty insulting to know that they don't even show up to the bargaining table, they don't even have meetings over the summer so that we could avoid all of this. We could have had the right masks, the right filtration, and ventilation. We could have had it all.

He explained that the school board, in line with the government, was "risking our health to achieve herd immunity, all so that the economy does better."

He continued, "I think a lot of students in Oakland have personal experience with losing loved ones. [The students] are seeing the impact, because there are a lot of people who couldn't go on to Zoom for work last year. A lot of the students' families were those who never got to take a break, and they were the ones getting sick."

Thomas also noted, "I don't see our union being there for us right now."

The WSWS spoke to Hector, a teacher in the Fremont School District, south of Oakland.

I am in full support of the Oakland students and teachers in standing up for themselves and their families.

In our district, cases have also been rising. There has been only a message of "schools are the safest and best places for students to be" coming from administration, the governor and the union. There hasn't even been talk of a one-week shutdown during the worst of Omicron.

Schools are a known vector of the virus and will only intensify the

situation in hospitals, which this past Monday have hit record numbers across the country. He continued,

Each school is a sinking ship as more and more teachers and students get sick. When students go home sick, teachers are forced to try and provide individual learning plans and keep up with the classroom. There is no reference from local, state and federal officials to the earlier calls to shelter in place and keep only essential workers on the job. Now everyone is "essential" because the corporations, governments and unions have all signed on to the mantra of keeping kids in schools so parents will continue to go to work to increase record profits.

Hector went on to describe the situation at his school:

After winter break, we received one N95 mask that doesn't fit many of us as it's a one-size approach. Our classrooms have 30-34 students in them. Parents have started keeping students home for fear of them getting COVID. Teachers are getting called to cover on their prep periods because there are no subs. Everyone is exhausted and fed up.

He wanted to let Oakland high school teachers and students know:

Your actions as students and teachers are inspiring and will no doubt lead to further walkouts in the coming weeks in schools around the Bay Area, the state and the country as we fight for our survival and a future safe learning environment free from the virus. Don't think for a minute that your action isn't important, you are fighting to save lives.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality encourage youth and teachers to get in touch with us today to share the conditions in your school and learn more about joining the developing opposition of teachers and students around the country and world.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact