

Oakland Education Association pursues farcical “safety” bargaining

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Widespread illness and quarantine have thoroughly disrupted classes in Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) as the Omicron variant causes record cases and hospitalizations in Alameda County. To defend themselves teachers have conducted a series of wildcat sick outs. Students began an indefinite strike last Monday.

In order to contain growing anger the Oakland Education Association (OEA) has threatened to call a vote for a “safety” strike with completely impotent demands that would do almost nothing to protect students, teachers and staff from infection.

According to an OEA email sent to teachers, their demands are:

- Weekly, voluntary testing available for students and staff at all schools
- Highest quality masks available for all students and staff
- An adult covering every classroom vacancy

The popular and essential demand raised by many students and teachers for shifting to distance learning until cases come down is intentionally ignored.

The situation confronting students and teachers is dire. Daily new confirmed cases in Alameda County are four times higher than at any previous point in the pandemic while the test positivity rate sits at nearly 20 percent indicating that many cases are going undetected. Despite misinformation claiming that the Omicron variant is mild, this has translated into record high hospitalizations nationwide. Pediatric hospitalizations in particular are three times higher than their previous peak.

At a public meeting of the student strikers on Friday, students described the impact of seeing their classmates and teachers out sick, and their fear of spreading a deadly disease to friends and family. According to one

sixth grader: “There are mass amounts of students that have been out in multiple classes. I’ve seen so many of my friends just not come to school for weeks because the plan by the district as a whole for how you are going to make sure COVID doesn’t spread has been poor, to say the least.”

The teachers and students of Oakland are part of a broader wave of educator strikes across the country against the bipartisan policy of mass infection. In just the past week, students and teachers have struck in St. Paul, Minnesota; Montgomery County, Maryland; Denver, Colorado; Round Rock, Texas; and Park City, Utah. The soaring number of infections has led numerous districts to switch to distance learning from a simple lack of staff to teach in person, including 250 districts in Oklahoma.

In order to save the lives of teachers, staff, students and their families, the West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee has been holding weekly meetings with the demand for “The immediate closing of school buildings until teachers themselves, on the advice of scientists, determine that it is safe to return,” and “Financial support for parents who must stay home with their children.”

In sharp contrast, the OEA is trying to keep schools open even as illness soars. Particularly pernicious is their demand for “safe staffing levels.” In a draft memorandum of understanding released Thursday, the OEA proposes assigning central office administrators to fill in for sick teachers in order to paper over the lack of substitute teachers.

Students need a safe education, not babysitters! No student can learn effectively with a revolving door of emergency substitutes. No teacher can effectively teach with 20 percent or more of their class out sick or in quarantine. In poll after poll, parents express a desire

for distance learning, but the district refuses to offer it and the teachers unions refuse to fight for it because the political decision has been made from the Biden administration that schools must remain in-person no matter how many people are infected.

At every step of the way throughout the pandemic, the OEA executive board has fought to constrain the militancy of teachers within the bounds set by the district. OUSD initially switched to distance learning in March 2020 in order to prevent wildcat strikes. When the district demanded a return to in person instruction in March 2021, OEA dropped the demand of teachers that in-person education be tied to low community transmission. Despite widespread opposition among rank-and-file teachers, the union insisted that they had to vote for the district's proposal, because if teachers voted it down the district could enact it unilaterally.

By agreeing to in-person instruction no matter how severe the state of the pandemic, OEA set the stage for the current crisis. As the Omicron variant began to surge over winter break, the union remained passive, only asking teachers to write emails to the superintendent. When teachers and students began their wildcat actions to combat COVID, the OEA executive maintained silence as they negotiated a new memorandum of understanding with the district behind the backs of the membership. In protest over being cut out of the process, the union safety bargaining team resigned on January 11.

The way forward for teachers and students requires rejecting in its entirety the policy of mass infection being pursued with the support of the OEA leadership. We urge all teachers, students, staff and parents looking to fight for the closure of schools to sign up here to build or join a Rank-and-File Safety Committee at your school site.



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