

Teachers union in Contra Costa, California prevents strike over COVID-19 safety measures

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Saturday, January 29 at 3 a.m., United Teachers of Richmond (UTR) reached a tentative agreement with West Contra Costa Unified School District (WCCUSD) on COVID-19 protocols. The union had threatened a strike sometime this week if an agreement was not reached on Friday at noon.

The union had polled its members via email last week, and 72 percent of respondents were prepared to strike. The demands included KN95 masks for students and teachers, weekly testing and qualified instructors in all classrooms. Due to extensive COVID-related absences among staff, the last demand entailed higher pay for substitute teachers.

The devastating impact of COVID on Contra Costa County, California residents and schools has already made public education severely limited. Last week, 62 classrooms were closed due to infections. So many students have reported sick that the open classrooms are often nearly empty. Out of an enrollment of 27,000 students, 2,186 have tested positive and 305 staffers among the district's 27,000 employees have contracted the disease.

The county has only 1,165,927 residents, yet the health department has reported 175,257 cases and 1,102 deaths. Children are particularly suffering. The 7-day rolling average for youth under 11 years of age is 189.5 per 100,000. For the 12-18 age group, the average is 183 per 100,000.

On Facebook, district officials declared, "Our ventilation systems are operating in all of our schools and they are being kept up and changed." A teacher responded, "What ventilation? Open doors and windows?" Many schools do not have any ventilation system, and WCCUSD initially distributed only cloth

masks. Last week, after two years of the pandemic, Superintendent Kenneth Hurst announced that they had discovered that cloth masks provided inadequate protection. They have now ordered KN95 masks.

Staff absences have prompted Superintendent Hurst to threaten teachers: "employees coordinating with one another to call in sick together is unacceptable and will not be tolerated."

Gabrielle Micheletti, the elementary director for the UTR, responded to Hurst by stating, "we [the union] don't want to be outside of classrooms and further disrupting routine for students..."

This expresses the opposition of the teachers unions to mobilizing teachers to demand adequate safety measures. It is also a slap in the face of the 16 teachers at two schools that walked out in early January due to the unsafe conditions in their classrooms.

The union has publicly released highlights for the agreement, which include providing KN95 masks to staff and students every day, weekly COVID-19 testing and an increase in pay for substitutes and elementary school teachers who volunteer to take additional students.

UTR president Marissa Glidden has declared the agreement as a victory. Despite mitigation measures, staff and students are still crowded together in classrooms. This is unsafe, and the exceptionally high infection rates in the school district makes it clear that the virus will continue to spread.

The UTR's announced agreement comes only shortly after the Oakland Education Association (OEA) announced its own tentative agreement with the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) over COVID safety protocols. In a similar manner, the OEA

president, Keith Brown, said that a strike would be called if an agreement was not reached.

The OEA was driven to make this threat due to the powerful unsanctioned sickouts by teachers and walkouts by students.

Students, teachers and parents who are increasingly furious over the return to in-school education have participated in sickouts, walkouts, protests and petitions across the globe. But the unions, particularly the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association, have pushed the murderous policy of school reopenings. The agreements with OUSD and WCCUSD do not protect the health of staff and youth.

Teachers must organize to reject these agreements by organizing independently of the pro-corporate unions. The West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees (WCERFSC) is uniting educators, students and parents against the subordination of lives to profit. The WCERFSC is demanding:

- The immediate closing of school buildings until teachers themselves, on the advice of trusted scientists, determine that it is safe to return
- The implementation of fully funded high-quality remote education
- Financial support for all workers and small businesspeople affected by temporary lockdowns
- A program of mass testing and contact tracing, including of children, with thousands of testing and vaccination centers set up throughout every major city
- A reversal of the CDC's shortening of its quarantine guidelines. Those infected or exposed must quarantine for at least 14 days, with full compensation made for missed work
- Mandatory masking with N95 grade or better masks to be provided free of charge in all public places
- A science education program directed at the working class, conducted with the assistance of scientists and physicians, to popularize understanding of airborne transmission and all other science related to the pandemic
- The installation of the highest quality HVAC and air filtration systems in every school
- A tax on the West Coast's 189 billionaires to pay for the needs of parents, educators and other workers impacted by the pandemic

Do not allow the tentative agreement to pass! Form

rank-and-file safety committees with coworkers and join us at our next WCERFSC meeting on Saturday, February 12, 12:00-2:00 p.m. PST to unite teachers in defense of health and safety.



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