

“They need to better fund these schools so students can have access to a good education”

## Oakland, California educators and students protest planned budget cuts and school closures

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On Monday, Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) Superintendent Kyla Johnson-Trammell presented the latest devastating attack on public schools in the district, threatening a wide range of cuts in response to a \$50 million budget shortfall.

The austerity package includes eight school closures and the merger of eight schools over the coming two years, eliminating vacant positions and firing teachers and administrators. In a clear attempt to rush past opposition, the public was given one day’s notice of the board meeting at which these cuts would be detailed and only eight days to respond before the resolution would be decided on February 8.

Monday’s virtual school board meeting drew over 1,800 attendees overwhelmingly opposed to school closures. The board held tight control of the meeting, shutting off the chat and preventing participants from even seeing who was attending. Nevertheless, the huge number of speakers protesting the budget cuts caused the meeting to last from 6 p.m. Monday evening until 3 a.m. Tuesday morning.

OUSD is specifically targeting smaller schools with enrollment of 400 students or less, with most closures clustered in deeply impoverished East Oakland. Educators, parents and students are furious about the cuts, and have carried out a series of protests each day this week. Students and teachers from Westlake Middle School, MetWest High School, and La Escuelita marched to the district offices on Tuesday, with two staff members at Westlake beginning a hunger strike against school closures.

The Westlake community school manager Moses Omolade told local news site *Oaklandside*, “We will not eat until you end all school closures. You all don’t want death on your hands. We will not eat until you all end your attacks on our schools.”

Not only are schools being closed, but COVID-19 is being allowed to spread through the return to fully in-person schooling. The closures will increase overcrowding in classrooms, spreading COVID-19 more rapidly. Throughout January, educators and students across Oakland engaged in a series of powerful wildcat strikes and walkouts to protest the deadly reopening of schools.

OUSD has been living on money borrowed from maintenance projects since 2013. While the district’s infrastructure is in decay, with \$3.2 billion required to repair school facilities, Johnson-Trammell proposes slashing desperately needed maintenance funding. The dilapidated state of the schools’ ventilation systems, which are an essential element in reducing COVID-19 transmission, is being totally ignored.

Cassidy, a high school student at a charter school in Oakland, highlighted the continued unsafe conditions in her school, which has implemented similar measures to those agreed to by OUSD to reopen schools as COVID-19 spreads.

She told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “We’re pretty much in the same place that we were before. Nothing much has changed. There were a number of students out today, I’m assuming because of COVID. I think everyone’s still feeling like we shouldn’t be here but we

don't know how to stop it. Generally, people are still uneasy about being there, having to be in the classrooms all day."

Expressing her opposition to planned school closures in OUSD, Cassidy noted, "I've heard some people making points about how all these schools are in areas where these students won't have access to transportation as easily because it's farther away and they live in low-income areas."

Regarding Monday's school board meeting, Cassidy stated, "I saw that the OUSD people were also trying to frame it in their way as, 'This is good for diversity for all of our schools. We're going to shut down the less funded schools.' What, rather than making the students have to travel farther to school and making the classrooms more crowded, particularly during COVID. Also, people will not get as good an education because they're in a larger classroom."

While demanding further austerity, Johnson-Trammell continues to receive a bloated salary, with her total pay and benefits amounting to roughly \$450,000. She is slated to receive a \$19,600 salary increase in fiscal year 2022-23. To top it off, the school board approved a paid three-month sabbatical for Johnson-Trammell from April to June 2022, in the middle of the school year! While Johnson-Trammell earns an executive salary, nearly 74 percent of Oakland students are living in poverty.

The Oakland Education Association (OEA) has refused to mobilize teachers in response to the proposed budget cuts. Their only action has been to voice support for the two teachers who have begun a hunger strike, a symbolic measure that will do nothing to stop the wave of austerity.

In 2019, the OEA betrayed a powerful strike by Oakland teachers after reaching a quid pro quo with OUSD, in which teachers' meager pay raises were predicated on \$22 million in budget cuts. This sellout by the OEA prompted hundreds of students to demonstrate the following day, when OUSD implemented the cuts.

Since Biden's inauguration, the OEA has gone along with the Democratic Party demand to reopen schools despite rising COVID-19 infection rates. The OEA has refused to support the recent walkouts by educators and students. Last week, 464 students and 49 staff members were officially infected in OUSD schools as a result of these betrayals by the union.

OEA accepted a tentative agreement two weeks ago on COVID-19 protocols, just as the nearby United Teachers of Richmond did last week with West Contra Costa

Unified School District (WCCUSD). On Friday, it was announced that OUSD will postpone a key part of the agreement for half a year, proof of vaccination, and WCCUSD will also postpone proof of vaccination without providing a new deadline, meaning that the agreements were fraudulent, and students, teachers and their families will face rising infection rates.

The growth of opposition among students and rank-and-file educators in Oakland and throughout the Bay Area is part of an international surge of working class opposition to government policies to "live with" the pandemic. In the last month, teachers from both OUSD and WCCUSD organized sickouts without the union support, while teachers in nearby San Francisco also held wildcat sickouts in early January.

Teachers have called in sick or walked out to protest COVID-19 policies in Birmingham and East Baton Rouge, Alabama; Detroit, Michigan; West Ada, Idaho; Chicago, Illinois; Seattle, Washington; Ontario and Quebec, Canada; and New South Wales, Australia. Students have shown growing solidarity with their teachers in Oakland, Seattle, New York City, Portland, Chicago, Boston, and other cities across the US.

There is massive opposition to the COVID-19 policies and the attack on public education demanded by the ruling elites. But union leaders, often in a cabal with right-wing organizations, have done everything to suppress this movement. Most of the educator actions have been unsanctioned. In the San Francisco Bay Area, unions have threatened strikes only to reach sellout agreements at the last minute. They have made it clear that they will not fight for the health or the jobs of their members.

The only way to defend schools and the safety of workers is through organizing independently of the trade unions. Educators, students and parents should join and help build the West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees, which will meet next at 12 p.m. PST on Saturday, February 12. Register today and invite your coworkers, family and friends!



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