

Oppose racist division!

Oakland, California, school closures and budget cuts are an attack on the entire working class!

International Youth and Students for Social Equality at UC Berkeley
8 February 2022

This Tuesday evening, the board of the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) in California will vote on budget cuts that will permanently close or merge up to 15 schools in the next two years, as well as defer maintenance, eliminate vacant positions and fire teachers and administrators.

Oakland is one of the poorest large cities in the United States, with one out of five residents living below the poverty line. Located in one of the most expensive regions of the country, the San Francisco Bay Area, this rate underestimates the extent of impoverishment and struggle faced by residents.

The proposed budget reductions follow a \$22 million cut three years ago passed as part of the betrayal by the Oakland Education Association (OEA) of a powerful seven-day strike of over 3,000 Oakland educators.

The attack on educators, students, and families in Oakland is part of a nationwide and international assault on public education. Forced into unsafe classrooms amid the rampant spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and deprived, year after year, of a living salary and the necessary materials and facilities to teach with, over half of all US teachers are now considering leaving the profession.

Oakland has a long history of working class struggle, which has been suppressed by the unions for decades. Following the post-war economic boom of the 1950s and 1960s, Oakland, like many rust belt cities in the American Midwest, experienced intensifying poverty as industrial life declined.

It is also among the most racially diverse cities in the US and home to a large immigrant population. Data from Alameda County shows that Oakland is 35 percent white, 24 percent black, 17 percent “other,” 16 percent Asian, and 7 percent mixed race.

Prices have risen about 100 percent for new homes in the Bay Area over the last 10 years during the tech industry boom, including a cluster of “elite zip codes” that have emerged in Oakland. This has pushed working class and impoverished people out of the city, disproportionately impacting African

American families.

In this context, an effort is underway to present the Oakland budget cuts entirely in racial terms, as evidence of an attack by white people against black people. This is the central message of Reparations for Black Students in Oakland (RBSO), an organization that has worked with the OEA and several other groups over the past year to create a fund for “reparations” for black students.

Nearly a year ago, on March 31, 2021, the OUSD passed the RBSO’s “Reparations Resolution,” which “acknowledged the long history of anti-Black structures, practices, policies, and culture in our public education system in Oakland.” RBSO demands “a multi-million dollar reparations fund for the remaining 8,314 Black students in OUSD to thrive.”

The unity of the OEA and OUSD in supporting RBSO should give pause to rank-and-file educators, parents and students about the character of this organization and its aims. For decades, the union and the school board have conspired to systematically degrade public education and convert dozens of public schools into for-profit charters. They are both integrated with the Democratic Party and serve as agents of the capitalist class. Their support for RBSO and its promotion of “reparations” for black students is meant to block the unity of students and workers of all races in a fight to defend public education.

Significantly, the pseudo-left group By Any Means Necessary (BAMN), which is active in the Bay Area and previously had a member on the OEA Executive Board, has said nothing publicly on the planned school closures or budget cuts. BAMN is a rival faction to the current OEA leadership and also promotes racist politics and the subordination of workers to the Democratic Party, which likely explains their present silence on the OUSD austerity measures.

The assault on education is fundamentally a class question, as it is being conducted against *all* workers across the US and globally. Some of the most dramatic cuts in the last five years

have taken place in areas that are predominantly white, such as West Virginia, where in 2018 teachers conducted a powerful wildcat strike that initiated a wave of teachers' strikes across the US.

While the incomes of the bottom 99 percent of all people worldwide have declined since the start of the pandemic, the world's 10 richest men have doubled their wealth, according to a recent report from Oxfam.

The Democrats and their allies in the unions prefer to keep the discussion in racial terms because it allows them to hide their own despicable role in implementing austerity measures, from New York City, to Chicago, and across California. This includes Oakland, where the Democrats have overseen decades of unrelenting austerity and rising homelessness, which they seek to cover up through the promotion of racial politics.

The Democratic Party has been at the forefront of converting public schools to for-profit charter operations. Jerry Brown, former mayor of Oakland and previously the governor of California for many terms, oversaw the initial opening of for-profit charters in Oakland and assisted with the funneling of public schools funds into his own charter schools.

The worst attacks on public education were under the Obama administration, which oversaw the destruction of 300,000 public school jobs, scapegoated teachers and sharply expanded the charter school industry through the use of Race to the Top (RTTT) policies that intensified the pro-charter and edubusiness agenda of George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind.

It is repeated endlessly that there is "no money" to fund public education, despite a \$760 billion war budget. The fundamental barrier to providing quality education to the tens of millions of working class students in this country is not a racial question, but a class question.

Consider OUSD Superintendent Kyla Johnson-Trammell, who is black and attended OUSD schools growing up. With a total salary and benefits package above \$450,000, she lives in an entirely different world than Oakland students and educators. As a reward for pushing through cuts to the schools, she is slated to receive a \$19,600 increase in fiscal year 2022-23. Even more, the school board voted a paid three-month sabbatical for Trammell, from April through June 2022, in the middle of the school year!

The defining characteristic that unites Oakland students is that they overwhelmingly come from working class backgrounds. Some 73.8 percent of the student population is "Socioeconomically Disadvantaged." This includes thousands of working class children who are white, black, Asian, Hispanic and mixed race. Meanwhile, the school district board members are majority non-white.

The RBSO highlights that "8 out of 12 schools targeted for immediate school closure are 48% Black or more." But what is more defining of these schools is that 85 percent of the student body is low income. Other deeply impacted students will be those from immigrant backgrounds, students speaking Spanish,

Mandarin, Mam, Arabic, Vietnamese and Tagalog.

RBSO has linked the cuts in Oakland to devastating cuts in Philadelphia, New York City and Chicago. What they omit is that these four cities all have Democratic mayors and Democratic governors. Two of the mayors are black: Chicago's Lori Lightfoot, a vicious opponent of remote learning, and New York's Eric Adams, also an opponent of remote learning and an enthusiastic supporter of charter schools.

The politics of racially dividing the working class do not advance the interests of working people. Rather, they serve the interests of the capitalist class. The inequality and poverty experienced in Oakland, including by working class black students, will not be solved by appeals to the Democratic Party for reparations for a racial minority—it is those very politicians who are implementing the cuts against all workers.

The way forward is to unite all sections of the working class against the attack on education. This must be connected to a broader strategy of the working class in the US and internationally to oppose the "herd immunity" policies of mass infection and eliminate COVID-19 from our schools and workplaces.

In January, students and teachers across Oakland carried out powerful strikes and walkouts independently of the OEA to struggle against the deadly school reopening policies implemented by OUSD and state Democrats. The OEA, following in the footsteps of the national teachers unions, has refused to call for an end to in-person instruction, with compensation, until schools can be made safe.

In reality, the OEA and the trade unions across the country, which accepted and allowed schools to reopen in the middle of the winter Omicron surge, bear a great responsibility for the mass infections which have taken place on every open campus, many of which have led to students inadvertently infecting their family members.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at UC Berkeley calls on all Oakland teachers, students, parents and workers to join and help build local chapters of the IYSSE and rank-and-file committees at every school, in order to unify teachers and students of all races against the attack on education and the ongoing threat of the pandemic.

We urge you to join us at the next meeting of the West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees at 12 p.m. PST on Saturday, February 12, to discuss this perspective and unite students and teachers with the broader working class against these cuts.



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