

Despite massive opposition, Oakland, California, school board votes to close seven schools

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Early Wednesday morning, the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) Board of Education voted 4-2-1 to close seven public schools, merge an additional two, and reduce the size of two more by cutting grades over the next two years. Citing a more than \$50 million budget deficit and a decline in student enrollment, the decision came despite mass opposition from parents, students and community members.

On the day of the vote, more than 2,000 viewers logged in to the virtual board meeting and hundreds raised their hands to speak during public comment. During the four hours of public comment, all speakers unanimously opposed the school closures.

The original resolution on OUSD school closures sought to permanently close or merge a total of 16 primary schools, but that number was reduced to seven closures and two mergers by next school year after a series of amendments were introduced in the face of mass opposition. Educators, parents and students should have no illusions that the amendments will prevent further cuts and closures.

Mass demonstrations throughout Oakland opposing the school closures and budget cuts occurred in the lead up to the vote and continued over the past week. On Friday, a major walkout took place at Oakland Technical High School in opposition to the budget cuts. Hundreds of students, educators and families marched to the district offices.

Students at Los Altos High School in nearby Santa Clara County held a march in solidarity with the Oakland residents opposing the closures. Students and teachers pointed to California's current multibillion-dollar education budget surplus as a source of funds to pay for the budget deficit in Oakland.

Multiple school board members, the Oakland Education Association (OEA) and the organization Reparations for Black Students in Oakland (RBSO) have attempted to present the Oakland school closures entirely in racial terms. However, the racialist narrative being put forward has very clear politics which serve only to funnel genuine opposition to school budget cuts back into the Democratic party—the same party which has been at the forefront of attacks on public education in

California.

The race-based analysis behind school closures obscures the fundamental class issues that underlie the attacks on public education and social inequality impacting millions of working-class families of all races across the US and internationally.

Those presenting the budget cuts as an act of systemic racism are entirely oriented to the Democratic Party. This includes two OUSD educators, Moses Omolade and Maurice Andre Sanchez, who have been on a hunger strike for two weeks and have played a leading role in organizing protests and actions in response to the school closures. Both have been promoted by RBSO, and in a recent interview on Democracy Now! Omolade stated, "Systemic racism has run rampant in our communities for far too long, and this is another one of those times."

On Thursday, the hunger strikers issued a list of demands required for them to stop their hunger strike, which center on meeting in-person with California's Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom, OUSD Superintendent Kyla Johnson-Trammell, and the OUSD school board. Their demands also appeal to Newsom and other Democrats in the state to remove the debt from OUSD and stop school closures.

Broader layers of workers and youth opposed to school closures and budget cuts must be warned that appeals to the Democratic Party are a political dead end. For decades, the Democrats and Republicans have carried a bipartisan assault on public education in California and throughout the US.

California Superintendent of Education Tony Thurmond has threatened to put OUSD in state receivership unless they make \$60 million in cuts. For his role, Governor Newsom, the darling of the San Francisco elite, is an enemy of the working class and youth. He has led the push to reopen schools amid the COVID-19 pandemic and officially lifted California's indoor mask mandates as part of his homicidal "Endemic Plan" to drop all public health measures meant to slow the spread of the virus.

In an attempt to cover for budget shortfall claims made by the school board, Oakland's Democratic assembly member Mia Bonta recently introduced Assembly Bill 1912, which would provide \$10 million to the school district. The bill is largely

superficial and contains no provisions which would reverse the closures and consolidation plan that OUSD school board members approved on Wednesday and makes no attempt to prevent further cuts to education.

On Wednesday, OEA President Keith Brown came out in support of Bonta's bill and said in a statement that the OEA plans to file a legal complaint with the Public Employment Relations Board to challenge the district's decision to close schools, stating, "If it comes to it, I am prepared to ask Oakland educators to strike to protect our schools."

The threats by Brown and the OEA are nothing but empty verbiage and posturing used to suppress the growing opposition against budget cuts.

Workers and youth must not forget the treacherous role Brown and the OEA played during the 2019 Oakland teacher strike, which ended with Brown negotiating a quid pro quo deal for over \$20 million in cuts to the district to fund a salary increase for teachers below the rate of inflation.

The contract was a massive betrayal which did not meet the demands of teachers and enabled the district to impose deep budget cuts, close up to a third of the district's schools and expand the network of for-profit charter schools. In attempting to sell this betrayal, Brown told OEA members that school closures could not be legally negotiated as part of the contract.

The OEA and its parent unions, the California Teachers Association and National Education Association, worked to shut down the Oakland strike in order to isolate it from teachers in Fremont, Sacramento and other districts who were pressing for strike action against the state. The unions' betrayal of the Oakland strike also followed similar union betrayals of 33,000 striking teachers in Los Angeles the month prior.

The Democratic Party, along with local school boards and unions, has played a decisive role in the consolidation of public schools into charters. OUSD has seen a large growth in the number of charter schools, with the percentage of OUSD students attending increasing from less than 2 percent in 2001 to a whopping 30 percent in 2021.

While proponents often tout that the "choice" and "flexibility" of charter schools lead to better results, charters do not actually show any improvement in academics. Since charter schools do not charge tuition, they are considered to be "public" schools. However, many are operated as for-profit enterprises, run by so-called "Education Management Organizations" with funding for charters beginning at the federal level through Charter Schools Program-State Education Agencies (CSP-SEA) grants.

Massive attacks on public schools were led by the Obama administration, which oversaw the cutting of over 300,000 public school jobs and launched its Race to the Top education initiative in 2009, which greatly expanded charter schools by allowing them to circumvent restrictions. For his part, former Oakland Mayor and California Governor Jerry Brown oversaw some of the first openings of for-profit charters in Oakland and

founded two of his own charter schools, the Oakland Military Institute and the Oakland School for the Arts.

The fundamental social role of charter schools is to take public school funding and channel it into the hands of private profiteers. Although charters get standard per-student funding, they make their profits mainly by underpaying teachers and shortening services, especially to special education students. Although charters are legally restricted from refusing special education students, in practice they can get rid of low-performing students through disciplinary measures. Charter schools effectively function as parasites on the public education system.

Under the unprecedented conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, the unions have facilitated the bipartisan school reopening drive and allowed the virus to run rampant throughout schools. Workers cannot appeal to the unions or the Democratic Party because it is clear they are fundamentally hostile to their interests.

The unions, Democrats and their pseudo-left allies, including RBSO and By Any Means Necessary, are using racist politics to try to divide teachers and students along racial lines and to prevent them from drawing the necessary conclusions from the pandemic and the decades-long growth of austerity.

Students and educators must reject these pro-capitalist politics. The essential task is to break with the Democratic Party and the unions and instead unite workers and students with their class brothers and sisters all over the globe in an independent struggle against the pandemic and attacks on public education. This struggle is fundamentally bound up with a fight against capitalism and for socialism.

We urge Oakland students and educators to build chapters of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) and rank-and-file committees at every campus to take up this fight today.



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