

Despite massive opposition, Oakland, California school board forges ahead with school closures

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Last Friday night, the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) Board of Education rejected a proposal to postpone the closure of multiple schools in the northern California district. Despite public outcry against the closures, the board rejected the plan by a 3-2 vote, with one abstention.

The Friday vote confirmed the school board's plan to close two schools: Community Day School and La Escuelita Elementary, at the end of the current school year, with another five schools expected to close at the end of the 2023 school year. Board members also took the opportunity to restate their claim that the schools needed to be closed for budgetary reasons.

The board says the closures are necessary due to a \$50 million budget deficit and declining enrollment. The OUSD budgetary shortfall, however, is a small fraction compared to the \$3.2 billion Democratic governor Gavin Newsom announced would be used for his COVID-19 "endemic plan," and the multi-billion-dollar budgetary surplus the state experienced last year.

Parents, teachers and students have expressed their opposition to the plan to close OUSD schools since it was initially announced in January. This has included walkouts of students at Oakland Technical High School and a solidarity walkout at Los Altos High School, which is located in nearby Santa Clara County.

Friday's board meeting also provided a platform for two teachers, Moses Omolade and Maurice Andre San-Chez, who had been on hunger strike for 18 days in opposition to the closures. During the meeting Omolade announced that he was ending his hunger strike.

While there is widespread support for the strikers and other forms of protest in opposition to the school closures in Oakland, students and educators must be warned that the politics guiding the OUSD hunger strikes and promoted by various organization are aimed primarily at channeling opposition to school closures back into the Democratic Party, the very organization carrying out the closures and

broader attacks on public education in California and beyond. Notably, the hunger strikers had demanded a meeting with the board and other elected officials.

Prior to the event, San-Chez had described the call to hold the meeting as a "compromise," and that it felt "like a victory."

At the board meeting, many students denounced the vote and threatened to initiate a recall campaign against members of the board that voted against delaying the closure. Students also announced at the meeting that they will continue the hunger strike of two OUSD teachers.

Cassidy, a student at a charter high school in Oakland, California, highlighted her classmates' opposition to the plans to close schools, "I know a lot of people who went to these schools. They're saying the schools need to stay open."

Responding to the efforts by various activists and community organizations, such as Reparations for Black Students Organization (RBSO), to portray the school closures in racial terms, Cassidy explained, "We don't want any of the schools closed. These schools are majority low-income students, by far. That's a bigger issue than race. There's the whole 'lack of funding' speech, when the majority of the funding is going toward the police."

Significantly Omolade and San-Chez's hunger strike has been widely promoted by the Oakland Education Association (OEA) and other promoters of racialist politics, including the group RBSO. The two educators, who are deeply integrated into Democratic Party politics, had previously demanded meetings with Newsom, other political officials and the OUSD school board.

Omolade took the opportunity to hail "people in positions of power," which in Oakland would almost exclusively be elected Democratic Party officials. He stated that as part of the hunger strike, "We rubbed shoulders with people in power in this country and in this city, and all along the way we've learned that some of them are genuinely trying to

support black and brown students and youth in the city of Oakland and we have learned that some of them are not.” Omolade also announced that he will be ending his hunger strike.

San-Chez then proposed a series of protests, including outside of OUSD trustee Luz Cázares’ house, as a means of putting pressure on elected officials and stopping the school closures. His proposals were a reiteration of the failed perspective that Democrats can be forced to respond to demands of teachers, parents and students if only sufficient pressure is placed upon them.

San-Chez also made a plea to the trade unions to call a general strike in order to keep the schools open. Appeals to the pro-Democratic Party union are not only a dead end, but also funnel genuine opposition back into the very organizations which have refused for decades to mount a serious struggle to defend public education. Additionally, the unions have collaborated with the Biden administration to impose mass infection policies and reopen schools during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The OEA, along with promoting the hunger strike, has worked to get in front of mass anger to the Oakland school closures by holding a joint demonstration with the International Longshore Workers Union (ILWU) on Thursday.

At the event, roughly 200 ILWU members gathered alongside teachers, parents and students at Frank Ogawa Plaza, near Oakland City Hall, and unfurled a banner reading “Stop privatizing our schools, our ports.” The event was held shortly before the city council was scheduled to meet to discuss building a new waterfront development, which has been opposed by the ILWU.

Several speakers at the gathering also proposed that the ILWU shut down port operations, if the OEA calls a strike in early March. The ILWU has a long history of temporarily shutting down ports in limited protest stunts.

On February 7, the Representative Council of the OEA had called for a strike if any part of the school closure plan was carried through. Following Friday’s board meeting, OEA officials have announced that they will be meeting to discuss a potential strike action.

Despite the strike, ostensibly being called to stop school closures, OEA president Keith Brown spoke at the board meeting in favor of merely delaying the closures, stating “Having a year it allows us to have the engagement process that was denied to the community that was denied to the families.”

Brown further claimed that the board failed to do an equity analysis, since the school closures would disproportionately impact African-American and Hispanic youth.

The OEA officials’ statements were in fact part of a well-

worn script of union officials, which accept worsening working conditions, austerity and attacks on public education as long as they are done with adequate “engagement” of union officials and the attacks are done “equitably,” impacting workers of different races.

As part of the unions’ collaboration in the attack on education and working conditions, union officials have frequently opted to either call off strikes last minute or work to shut down the action as soon as possible. The OEA in 2019 ended a strike that lasted less than two weeks and pushed through a contract that abandoned two central demands—that there would be no school closures and no more cuts.

Last January, the OEA reached an agreement over COVID-19 safety protocols in the schools in order to prevent a strike. The agreement—which included use of N95 masks in schools, weekly COVID tests and outdoor eating structures—were at the time inadequate to stopping the spread of the highly infectious Omicron variant.

While the school board meeting took place only a day after Newsom announced his “endemic plan,” neither the OEA nor the teachers on hunger strike raised the danger of continuing in-person classes. Newsom’s plan includes the abandoning of basic mitigation measures, including the policy of quarantining students exposed to COVID-19.

Last month, students in OUSD and dozens of other school districts across the United States had organized walkouts in protest against the unsafe conditions in the school due to the surge in Omicron.

The decision by the OEA, Omolade and San-Chez to ignore the “endemic plan” is a product to their orientation to the Democratic Party. Any fight against Newsom’s action would require the widest mobilization possible of students and workers against the state government, the Biden administration and Democratic and Republican politicians across the country who have overseen the unsafe reopening of schools and workplaces.

The defense of high-quality public education and an end to the pandemic requires a fight against the Democrats and Republicans. Teachers, parents and student who are interested in carrying this struggle forward should join the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) and build rank-and-file committees in their schools, independent of the unions, to defend public education.



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