

San Francisco school district lays off 364 educators and staff

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Facing a \$125 million budget deficit, San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) has announced layoffs of 264 full-time and up to 100 part-time employees who will receive layoff notices on March 15. Those affected include 151 teachers, counselors and social workers.

United Educators of San Francisco (UESF), the union that claims to represent teachers, has refused to mobilize educators against these cuts, simply advocating that teachers sign a petition. UESF President Cassondra Curiel issued an empty appeal, stating, “There is no financial reason to get rid of these vital educators, who provide essential instruction, services, and programs to students and their families.”

Layoff notices became a matter of routine in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and have once again become a yearly occurrence. Though the 2022–2023 state budget is \$197 billion and the state anticipates a \$31 billion surplus, defending public education is of little concern to the state’s Democratic Party politicians and San Francisco’s school board, which instead obsesses over reactionary racist politics.

The policies of the school board members left them vulnerable to a right-wing campaign to recall three members. This was backed by San Francisco Mayor London Breed, one of the most fervent advocates of in-person learning as the pandemic continues to rage, in order to force parents back to work and increase the wealth of California’s financial elite.

With the recall of the three board members and the announced retirement of current Superintendent Vincent Matthews, Breed will create a compliant school board tasked with further assaults on public education and teachers’ salaries as part of the Democratic Party’s funneling of funding to charter

schools.

Two weeks ago, in his “Letters From the Desk of the Superintendent,” Matthews wrote, “Funding for schools and districts is based on the numbers and characteristics of students served. For the past three years, school site budgets have not decreased proportional to the decrease in the number of students they serve.”

The justification used by Bay Area school boards and politicians to blame school closures on low attendance is a cynical argument that deliberately ignores the link between the decline in school attendance and the deadly pandemic policies pursued by the ruling class. There has been an explosion in child COVID-19 infections and deaths across the US, fueled by the Omicron variant and exacerbated by the decision to reopen K-12 schools to in-person learning since fall 2021 after endless media propaganda that children are “safe” from COVID-19 infection.

COVID-19 cases in the San Francisco Bay Area caused massive staffing shortages and student absences, with as much as 20 percent of all staff out sick at Oakland Unified School District in January and many classrooms left empty of students. Many parents see no other option to keep their children safe than to pull them out of school. California as a whole has had over 8,000,000 cases and almost 84,000 deaths during the pandemic. The callous push for in-person teaching has resulted in teacher deaths and fear among students, parents and educators.

The situation in San Francisco will only become worse as UESF has agreed with the district to end the mask mandate for middle and high school students on March 12, with elementary schools joining on April 2. In a basic assault on public health, the union and the district are putting students and their families at risk by

making safety measures a matter of individual responsibility and encouraging COVID-19 transmission.

Amanda Hart, a UESF spokesperson, told the San Francisco Standard, “There’s enough mixed feelings about this issue that we’re going to have to find a balance here. We’re trying to be respectful of people’s personal choice at this point.”

On the other side of San Francisco Bay, the Oakland Education Association (OEA) is following the same path as the UESF. After agreeing to end classroom quarantine measures and calling off a student strike in the middle of the Omicron surge, the union now refuses to wage a fight against massive budget cuts and the resulting impact on students and staff. Both San Francisco and Oakland students have significant poverty rates of 53 percent and 73.8 percent, respectively.

In addition to the acceptance of mass layoffs, the UESF has betrayed its members by signing a tentative agreement for a sellout contract that will expire on June 30, 2023. San Francisco teachers had been working almost two years under an expired contract. The full details of the contract remain hidden, but a \$4,000 bonus that has been made public gives a clue to the crumbs being distributed.

Since the expiration of the last contract, the consumer price index has risen 9 percent, and by June of next year it may reach 12 or 15 percent. For the average San Francisco teacher earning \$75,846, that will result in a 7–10 percent salary cut. In addition, sabbaticals and extra preparation periods for Advanced Placement teachers will be suspended or limited in the next two years.

Teachers and students across the region have held sickouts and wildcat strikes over school closures, while the teachers unions have sabotaged an effective strategy to combat the disease. While the pandemic has ushered in record profits for the state’s 189 billionaires, the economic costs of widespread illness are being paid by teachers, students and the rest of the working class.

Governor Newsom initiated an “endemic” COVID-19 policy last month, which will enable Californians to “live with the virus” by turning COVID-19 infections into a yearly routine. Few residents are reassured by this plan, and last week educators in Grass Valley, California, called in sick due

to the lifting of mask mandates. No one should have any confidence in the proclamation that COVID-19 has become endemic. Despite the reduction of drastic cases, the BA.2 Omicron subvariant as well as future variants will result in further transmission and death.

Throughout California, students, parents and teachers have opposed the two-pronged assault of in-person schooling and budget cuts. The teachers unions, beholden to the Democratic Party and the capitalist system, have sabotaged every struggle and agreed to every attack on education. We urge educators, parents and students in the Bay Area and throughout the region to organize independently and join the West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees to carry out the necessary struggle to fight to defend jobs and education.



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