

“We are all stretched thin, trying to cover multiple roles”

As Sacramento teachers strike enters second week, state superintendent begins negotiating sellout contract

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On Friday, teachers and school staff in the Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD) ended the third day of their strike over chronic understaffing and a lack of COVID-19 safety measures. Roughly 5,000 teachers and staff were joined by students and families to protest unsafe and unsustainable conditions.

Sacramento teachers have been working without a contract or raise since June 2019. Inflation has risen 11 percent since then, resulting in a massive paycut, while the COVID-19 pandemic has made their jobs significantly more dangerous and stressful. The last contract proposal from the district includes a mere 2 percent raise, leaving staff in a far worse economic position than before the pandemic.

A chronic lack of teachers and substitutes across the district regularly leaves thousands of students without classroom teachers on any given day. The militancy of school staff, alongside broad support among students and families, has been on full display during the strike.

Christina, an early childhood educator for ages 3-5, described the immense burden budget cuts in the district have produced, stating:

My workload has absorbed the entirety of the First Five program for SCUSD, which was once enhanced by a nurse, a school psychologist, an enrollment coordinator and an amazing co-teacher. It has been difficult to adjust to the demands of all these roles, on top of teaching, but the district has dwindled its support of early education and learning programs in the last 6 years, and all signs indicate it will continue to do so.

I have no backup in the event I am ill or unable to teach that day. There is a sub shortage, and so it basically means that, if I am out, my students do not receive program that day. Staff shortages also water down the quality of services we are able to provide for families. We are all stretched thin, trying to cover multiple roles. It's hard to provide high-quality services when you're pulled in so many directions.

In sharp contrast to their membership, the unions involved, the Sacramento City Teachers Association (SCTA) and Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1021, fully intend to isolate the strike and call it off without any resolution to their members' demands. In August 2021, the SCTA proposed continuing the previous contract through the 2021-22 school year with only a 3.5 percent raise. For a starting teacher in the district, this would only amount to \$710 more than the district's wage proposal.

Both unions have insisted that their strikes are regarding unfair labor practices, a technical term which means they are making no economic demands like wage increases in the strike. Instead, the unions are begging the district to “bargain in good faith.” In its March 22 update, SEIU Local 1021 explicitly stated that the strike “will end when District management decides to come back to the negotiating table willing to reach a fair agreement,” i.e., before any raises or safety measures are agreed upon.

Sacramento teachers can remember well the one-day unfair labor practice strike called by the SCTA in April 2019. Three years later and conditions have only gotten

worse without any contract.

At Friday's rally, SCTA President David Fisher praised the intervention of California Superintendent of Education Tony Thurmond, who met privately with the SCTA and SEIU.

Thurmond told the media, "What we care about more than anything is just getting the dialogue reinitiated." Thurmond has a long history of strangling teacher struggles that have erupted since he was elected in 2018. While in the state assembly, he voted for Assembly Bill 1840, which demanded school closures in Oakland. He has continued on the same path as the state superintendent.

In the 2019 Oakland teacher strike, Thurmond intervened sharply behind closed doors to push through a sellout contract that included closing schools, dropping nurse staffing demands and accepting \$22 million in budget cuts. The Oakland Education Association (OEA) came to the defense of the district, promoting its claim that it did not have the money to meet teachers' demands. Months later, Thurmond repeated his role in shutting down the strike by teachers in New Haven, California.

The attack on education is hardly unique to California and affects teachers across the US. The strike by Sacramento teachers coincides with a powerful three-week strike by Minneapolis teachers, who are facing a concerted effort to end their strike in favor of a sellout contract with only a 2 percent raise the first year and a 3 percent raise the second.

There is enormous opposition to the efforts of the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers (MFT) to ram through the sellout contract within 48 hours of its release on Friday. One Minneapolis teacher commented on the MFT's Facebook page, "If this is what winning looks like to MFT, I'd hate to see their version of losing."

In reply to a video by an MFT negotiator touting the deal, another teacher wrote, "It's funny how this is the 2nd video I have seen promoting this contract!! They must be running scared that the majority will vote NO! These videos are so inappropriate!!"

Another added, "Wow, you are telling people how to vote now? This union is disappointing me more and more by the minute."

The SCTA's official twitter account praised the Minneapolis tentative agreement that amounts to a large paycut, giving an indication of what the union plans for Sacramento teachers.

The chronic underfunding of public education is not the result of "unfair labor practices" in individual districts. It

is a conscious political decision agreed to by both the Democrats and Republicans who have pursued a pandemic policy of mass infection while steadily shifting funding from social services into record military budgets.

Fighting this attack on education requires workers to counterpose their own political opposition, independent of both big business parties and the trade unions, through the formation of rank-and-file committees. These committees must fight for their own demands, including the following:

- Every necessary public health measure to contain and eliminate COVID-19 transmission, including distance learning, masks, vaccines and air filtration!
- Full funding of education to reduce class sizes and increase support staff!
- An immediate 30 percent pay increase to make up for years of inflation and lost raises, along with yearly cost-of-living adjustments into the future!
- Full health care benefits!

Teachers across Northern California are opposed to the unsafe conditions and low pay that has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Roughly 1,500 teachers in Mount Diablo Unified School District voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike earlier this month, as did teachers in the smaller Gravenstein Union School District in Sebastopol, California.

The conditions of underfunding, understaffing and widespread infections are common across the country. The fight against these universal conditions must break out of the district-by-district straitjacket imposed by the unions and develop into a nationwide strike. Sacramento teachers who wish to build an independent rank-and-file committee to carry out this struggle should fill out this form today.



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