

Strike by Sacramento, California educators at critical juncture as union signals support for austerity demands

Rena Cassimeda
30 March 2022

Are you a Sacramento educator? Contact the WSWS and let us know what you think about the state of the strike and the way forward.

Nearly 5,000 teachers and school workers are on day six of their strike in the Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD) in California over COVID-19 safety concerns, severe under staffing issues, low pay, and cuts to healthcare benefits.

In a clear attempt to isolate the struggles of teachers and support staff workers, the district has refused to negotiate with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1021, which covers classified staff in the district, until March 30. This has also been aided by the mainstream media, which has focused its coverage of the strike entirely on negotiations between the district and the Sacramento City Teachers Association (SCTA).

Classified staff, who include instructional aides, custodians, school bus drivers, food service and clerical workers, are the lowest paid employees and have faced immense dangers over the course of the pandemic. Presently an estimated 400 vacancies of classified staff exist in the district, placing immense workloads onto remaining staff workers. An estimated 25 percent of school bus drivers left the district in the past six months alone due to untenable conditions. According to a recent video press release from SEIU 1021, classified staff have not received a cost-of-living adjustment in six years. Many of these workers struggle to pay rent without second or third jobs.

“My working conditions and the [classroom] conditions of my students are directly affected by the district’s unwillingness to give full-time work to support staff in the SEIU and avoid giving them healthcare,” one teacher told the *World Socialist Web Site*, expressing the determination of teachers to stand united with support staff workers.

A support staff worker responded in kind. One worker, referring to the district’s current offer, posted on social media, “It’s really disingenuous when you claim to increase

onetime compensations (which is minuscule), and don’t acknowledge the attempt to gut health benefits for more than 40% of your teachers.”

Negotiations between the SCTA and the district this week have shown that the union is willing to accept austerity and end the strike as soon as possible. In its latest counterproposal to the district, issued on Monday, SCTA officials agreed to a mere 2 percent ongoing pay raise with additional one-time bonuses to account for the two years educators in the district have been working under an expired contract, since 2019.

The bonuses, which are to be paid for by federal COVID-relief funding, include one-time stipends only available to educators who were employed during designated school years: 3 percent for 2021-2022, 1 percent for the 2020-2021, 1 percent for 2019-2020.

Additionally, a one-time 1.65 percent stipend will be given to teachers for three additional professional development days added to the 2022-2023 school year, which the union proposes must center around “implicit bias” and “anti-racist” training. This is in no way progressive. Instead, the union is using the guise of “social justice” to cover for the austerity it has accepted, which will affect teaching staff and students of all races. It is not racism but capitalism and the control of society by a tiny corporate and financial elite that is responsible for the decades-long assault on public education by the Democrats as much as the Republicans.

The proposed raises and bonuses will in fact amount to major pay cuts for teachers faced with staggering levels of inflation and high cost of living. During the 2021-2022 school year alone, inflation has skyrocketed by 7.9 percent. Gas prices throughout the state are the highest in the nation and continue to average as high as \$6 per gallon. With no strike pay offered to teachers by the unions, much of the proposed bonus money will barely cover lost wages during the walkout.

Even before the pandemic, California teachers suffered a

years-long decline in real wages due to the policies of the Democratic Party, which controls all levers of government in the state. According to data from Bureau of Labor and Statistics, teachers' salaries on average have risen by only 11 percent from the 2015-2016 school year to the 2020-2021 school year. Over the same five-year period inflation has risen by 12 percent.

Proposed cuts to healthcare benefits remain a major concern for educators in the present strike. To cut costs, the district has proposed to switch its health care coverage from the present HealthNet benefits plan to Kaiser, which would take effect by the 2022-2023 school year. To phase out the HealthNet benefits package, the district has offered a stipend to cover just 80 percent of the out-of-pocket costs for the 2022-2023 school year and a \$3,000 incentive stipend to any teacher who moves to the new Kaiser plan offered by the district by June 30, 2022.

The only change made by the SCTA to the proposed cuts to health care benefits was the union's call for the district to pay a 100 percent stipend of teacher out-of-pocket health care costs for the 2022-2023 school year. Facing the immense opposition to this proposal by educators, the district and SCTA have agreed to postpone any decision until next year, with additional benefit plans options for teachers to be negotiated by March 1, 2023.

Like their counterparts throughout the country, teachers in Sacramento, Los Angeles, Oakland and other California cities have repeatedly been thrust into struggle against Governor Newsom and state school Superintendent Tony Thurmond, who have continued the assault on public education carried out by their predecessors. This includes the continued diversion of public funds to for-profit charter schools.

While claiming there is no money to guarantee high-quality public education and a decent living standard for educators, the governor and the state legislature in Sacramento continue to hand over tax breaks and other incentives to corporations in Silicon Valley, Hollywood and the oil, aerospace and defense industries. At the same time, Biden has unveiled a new budget that will massively increase funding for the military as the US ramps up its reckless confrontation with Russia, which threatens to erupt into world war.

It is impossible for educators to mount a powerful counter-offensive to improve their living standards and public education through the unions, which are completely integrated into the Democratic Party, which is imposing a "let it rip" pandemic policy, along with austerity and school privatization. More evidence of this was seen in the sellout of the more than two-week strike of Minneapolis teachers and support staff by the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers,

which accepted a deal that paid teachers raises of just 2 percent and 3 percent over two years, along with a one-time \$4,000 bonus, far below the present rate of inflation. Most education support professionals, meanwhile, will receive raises of just \$1 an hour each year.

That is why Sacramento educators must take the conduct of the strike into their own hands through the formation of a rank-and-file strike committee, which will issue its own non-negotiable demands, and fight to mobilize the broadest support among parents, students and workers throughout the state, country and internationally.

Last week, *USA Today* posted a worried article, titled, "Schools primed for 'militant teacher strikes' over post-COVID pay, benefits and respect," which, despite the false reference to "post-Covid," nevertheless expressed alarm over the growing number of teacher strikes. In recent weeks, teachers in Minneapolis, Cotati-Rohnert Park School District in Sonoma County, and the Chicago suburbs have walked out; 700 Champaign, Illinois teachers overwhelmingly voted to authorize a strike, before the Champaign Federation of teachers union abruptly announced a tentative agreement; and educators in Rocklin Unified School District in California engaged in sickout action to oppose the lifting of mask mandates and the recent death of a colleague from COVID-19.

On top of that, workers throughout the country are striking or preparing to strike to fight the ravages of inflation, including 50,000 Albertson's and other supermarket workers in southern California and Chevron oil refinery workers in Richmond, north of Oakland. In opposition to the deliberate separation of these struggles by the unions, a rank-and-file educators committee would call for joint strike action across the state to win workers' just demands.

There exists mass opposition to cuts to wages and health care, the mass infection policies in schools, ongoing austerity measures and the danger of war. Workers require new forms of organization to assert their own interests, which are independent of the corporatist trade unions and capitalist parties.

The WSWs urges educators and staff in Sacramento to contact us to discuss organizing a rank-and-file committee at your school.



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