

Oakland Unified approves expansion of charters amid school closures

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On March 23, Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) board voted to lease several district campuses to charter schools, having already approved the closure of seven public schools over the next academic year. The schools slated for closure are almost exclusively elementary schools, and serve over 1,400 students primarily ages 5 through 11. The majority of students in the schools targeted for closure are impoverished and include the bilingual program of La Escuelita as well as Community Day School, which serves students expelled from other schools.

The board's actions have evoked widespread anger in the local Oakland community. Students, teachers and parents voiced overwhelming opposition at school board meetings, as well as conducting sustained and on-going actions such as rallies and school walk-outs since the start of this year. Parents expressed dismay at their children being displaced to schools located farther away, while local campuses are converted to charter schools. The fact that schools were targeted for closure based on their comparatively low enrollment further outraged parents, who do not want small classroom sizes limited to private school settings.

The dismantling of Oakland public schools is part of a broader attack on public education in the United States. There are currently 39 charter schools in Oakland, an increase from only 13 in 2003. OUSD's recent vote is just the latest step in expanding charter schools in the district. Charter schools receive public funding, but are largely run by for-profit management companies, part of a broader turn toward the privatization of public education.

As charter schools move into neighborhoods, they siphon students from the public school system, leading to lower enrollments and therefore reduced state funding, furthering the cycle of austerity and leading to

campus closures. Because California state law requires resources be shared between public and charter schools, closed campuses are then leased at favorable rates to charter schools. The steady dismantling of public education has sparked strong and continued opposition from teachers.

In 2019, over 3,000 Oakland teachers went on strike in opposition to the threat of school closures, endless budget cuts, declining real wages, and unbearable teaching conditions. The teachers union, Oakland Education Association (OEA), negotiated a sell-out deal with OUSD that made no meaningful improvement in teachers' working conditions. It did nothing to address key demands of teachers, which included an end to budget cuts and school closures, and living wages. Immediately after OEA pushed through the 2019 contract, OUSD passed \$22 million in budget cuts that included layoffs.

In January, OUSD implemented another \$40 million in budget cuts, which OEA ignored. But Oakland teachers and students, outraged over the unhealthy conditions exacerbated by the pandemic, conducted a series of wildcat strikes demanding increased COVID-19 safety precautions and a shift to distance learning until cases decreased. Many schools do not have a dedicated nurse and the Omicron wave spread easily among students and teachers. OEA refused to fight for distance learning, instead trying to limit teachers to toothless demands for outdoor eating areas, voluntary testing, and enough substitutes to cover when teachers were out sick with COVID. The OEA executive board's backroom maneuvers ultimately led the union's bargaining team to resign in protest.

Students in OUSD are returning from Spring Break Monday after the district removed the outdoor mask mandate in March and is exploring an end to the indoor

mask mandate as early as April 15. While OUSD continues to require certain individuals (symptomatic or unvaccinated and exposed) to wear masks while at school campuses, they acknowledge that they will not be monitoring and enforcing this requirement. Repealing these public health measures will put OUSD students, staff and their families at risk of catching and spreading the highly infectious BA.2 subvariant of Omicron.

Instead of fighting for safe conditions in schools, OEA sought to divert hostility to the district's measures behind an Unfair Labor Practice charge through the Public Employee Relations Board over school closures. Rather than directly opposing the closures, this legal action would require OUSD to first engage in a nine-month planning process prior to closure. Thus, even with a legal ruling in favor of OEA, the district can still close schools on the current timeline.

Oakland teachers, students and families confront the same crisis workers face across the world—collapsing living standards due to soaring inflation and the ongoing threat of the COVID-19 pandemic. For all the claims that there is no money for public education, corporations enjoy surging profits. Meanwhile, the White House recently announced the largest ever military budget of \$813 billion, and the state of California currently has a \$31 billion surplus to allocate in the 2022–23 fiscal year.

The Democrats no less than the Republicans are responsible for the assault on public education. Austerity measures in Oakland were enforced by Democratic-controlled local governments through state-imposed receivership of the district. During the 2019 strike negotiations, OEA defended the district's claim that there was not enough money to meet teachers' demands on pay and staffing—a sentiment echoed in this year's budget report claiming that OUSD could not provide staff with a salary increase of even 1 percent. A stark warning to Oakland teachers who have been working without a contract since last year!

In one of the most expensive cities in the United States, the starting salary for a teacher in OUSD can be as low as \$42,000 per year for a K-12 teacher, and \$28,300 for pre-kindergarten teachers. Superintendent Kyla Johnson-Trammell, in contrast, receives a salary of roughly \$450,000.

Teachers in Oakland must break out of the union straitjacket that seeks to isolate them district by district, and limit their demands to what the district says it “can afford.” This past week, the strike by teachers in Sacramento was called off by their union before even letting their membership see the tentative agreement. And no wonder, covering a period where inflation rose 11 percent, the Sacramento City Teachers Association is pushing a contract with only a 4 percent raise.

The teachers and students in Oakland have repeatedly demonstrated through wildcat strikes their willingness to fight. The question is now joining with other workers through building rank-and-file committees in a broader political fight to eliminate COVID-19 transmission and defend public education.



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