

Striking Oakland teachers denounce inequality and school cuts

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Last Friday, teachers in Oakland, California struck against planned school closures. Despite widespread anger, the Oakland Education Association (OEA), however, has tried to limit teachers to a one day Unfair Labor Practice strike, along with toothless appeals to the National Labor Relations Board, claiming that parents need at least a year of discussion before schools are closed.

Amid an upsurge of political activity among workers worldwide, Educators are in the lead of a growing struggle, with 10,000 Australian teachers conducting a 24-hour strike Wednesday over staffing shortages leading to hours of unpaid work and real pay cuts. Demanding the resignation of President Rajapakse and relief from skyrocketing fuel costs, 250,000 Sri Lankan teachers walked out for a day last week. At University of Illinois Chicago, 1,500 graduate students struck for a living wage last month. Teachers in Sacramento, California and Chicago have also struck or walked out in recent months.

WSWS reporters spoke with two striking Oakland teachers at United for Success Academy, a middle school, and the adjacent Life Academy of Health and Bioscience high school. At both schools, over 90 percent of the students live below the poverty level, highlighting the income disparity in a state with the most billionaires in the nation. During the course of the strike, almost every passing vehicle and pedestrian enthusiastically greeted the strikers.

Melissa, a teacher at Life Academy, told the WSWS, “There’s this idea from the government that we just need to operate business as usual, rushing to get the kids back to school. It definitely is having bad health effects. We do a good job with masks and hand sanitizer here but the custodial staff is so underpaid and short-staffed that it’s hard to keep the school clean. Absence and illnesses have been high. The pandemic has definitely had emotional effects on students too. Freshman take this big field trip every year. It’s a big part of the curriculum and this year several students said they didn’t want to go because they weren’t sure it would be safe. There’s just so much uncertainty for them.”

Pointing to the district’s decision to lift mask mandates, Melissa said, “I’m worried. I have family members who are immunocompromised, but I have to show up. I mean I can’t just not get paid. We do have weekly testing on site now which is great but our COVID safety seems to just be responsive but not proactive.”

Teachers, students and parents are furious over the attacks on public education and the complete indifference of Democratic politicians to COVID-19 illness and death. Last Monday, OUSD removed its mask mandate, just as the new BA.2.12 and BA.2.12.1 subvariants were reaching California. Already, teachers and students are being infected. The OUSD Covid-19 dashboard reported 35 student and 27 teacher cases in one week. The neighboring school district in Berkeley tripled last week. This is just the beginning of a new surge.

Another teacher from Life Academy, Margot, painted a picture of working as an educator throughout COVID-19. “When the pandemic first started my mental health was definitely not stable. I was working so hard and working from home is so draining. I would make sure to have ‘pull-outs,’ individual conversations and help, with all my students so I was sometimes working late until 7 pm some nights.”

She continued, “You could see what kind of home situations the students were in. A lot of them would have to step out to feed their siblings and take care of things at home. Definitely there is a lot of anxiety for the students, parents and families. They are still scared of catching COVID. Some families and kids have gotten really sick. I know families who lost their jobs and went homeless. Absenteeism is high. Sometimes students don’t come to school because they don’t have clean clothes or they are living in cars and didn’t sleep.”

Melissa spoke on the impact of inflation on working class families. “Many of my students are taking jobs. They’re teenagers and they start working to help their families. They come into class extremely tired. I had one student this week say he didn’t get home until midnight. How is he supposed

to do his homework or interact with the material in class in a meaningful way? I know lots of families are cohabiting. Teachers too. I live with my in-laws because I can't afford my own place here."

When asked about the threat of war and the recent passage of the largest-ever US military budget while teachers are continually told there is "no money" for the materials and wages they require, Melissa said, "Rage. I feel a lot of rage. The approach of the US is to completely defund public education. We have no resources for our community to stand on."

Under this deepening social crisis, the union efforts to restrict teachers to begging for the district to "engage the community" is a slap in the face. The Unfair Labor Practice charge stems from a 2019 agreement with the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) to provide a bogus one-year "engagement" before finalizing school closures. For years, the OEA has defended the district's massive budget cuts. In 2017, then OEA President Trish Gorham called cuts a "legal requirement." In the lead up to the 2019 strike, the OEA site representatives council voted down a proposal by the Oakland Rank-and-File Committee to oppose budget cuts because it would not be "good faith bargaining."

During the strike, OEA went so far as to invite the Alameda County Superintendent Karen Monroe as a speaker to a union rally as well as praise State Superintendent Tony Thurmond as the "adult in the room" during negotiations. Both figures in the Democratic Party had demanded over \$40 million in cuts from the district and insisted on school closures under threat of returning the district to state receivership. After teachers forced OEA to include an end to school closures in strike demands, OEA pushed through a sellout agreement that included the closure of Roots International Academy.

The union did not warn its members about future cuts, and they have no strategy to defeat them now. OUSD has announced extensive school closures along with mergers and staff reductions over the next two years as a result of a \$50 million deficit. Across the country, schools are facing budget shortfalls while President Biden gives an ever growing pot of gold to the military. Gavin Newsom, the Democratic governor of California, has turned a deaf ear to requests to forgive the \$30 million debt imposed on the district when it was in receivership because of too many 'complexities.'

Steven, a retired teacher from Life Academy with 25 years of teaching experience stated the OEA and its parent organization, the California Teachers Association (CTA), are playing a "horrible role in the school closures." He said, "the CTA is in favor of charter schools and they have their hook in the OEA leadership. They control the OEA leadership and that means they are against teachers. The idea

that we are supposed to fight school closures union by union, school by school, is ridiculous and ineffective.

"Today the district told the teachers, 'Don't strike or we won't have enough money for better compensation.' The school board is just developers. You'll notice when these schools are shut down new market rate buildings go up. Everybody is getting poorer. People don't have access to basic necessities of life and public education is one of those things. We have to end a system that does not prioritize the life of human beings. We are not able to reform it. Capitalism is destroying the climate and causing new wars over access to petroleum."

Confronting the threats of war, the continuing pandemic and the soaring cost of living, workers across the world are fighting back. Oakland teachers are starting to see growing militancy among teachers and all sectors of the working class as their weapon to defeat the assault on public education. To take forward the struggle, parents, teachers and students should join the growing network of Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees.

Continuing on the subject of war, Steven added, "I'm against war. I'm against both what Russia is doing and the US. The US obviously provoked this war. They say there is no money for us. There's plenty of money. If you just took the money from the billionaires you could pay for the whole world to be inoculated from COVID for example."

Another teacher said, "As a country, we fund the military industrial complex, the prison industrial complex, we fund prisons and incarcerations so much more than we're spending on education. There's definitely the resources there, it's about the priorities. I would love to see more money being put into education over the military or over keeping prisons open.

"This year, education throughout the pandemic has shown some of these massive disparities, the state that the public education system has been in and the massive reform that needs to happen. Uniting teachers across unions across the country, that's definitely needed. The more power the better."



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