

Oakland, California school security guards violently suppress anti-school closure protest

Ike Sasson
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On August 4, Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) security guards attempted to end an occupation at Parker Elementary School in Oakland, California, through the use of force, resulting in two activists needing to go to the hospital. Activists have occupied the school building for roughly 2 months in opposition to the OUSD Board of Education permanently closing the school as part of a larger set of budget cuts.

The occupation of Parker Elementary School is the latest expression of widespread opposition to school closures that were announced by OUSD superintendent Dr. Kyla Johnson-Trammell in January and reaffirmed by multiple votes by the OUSD Board of Education. Since the initial announcement of closures teachers, parents and students have held demonstrations and hunger strikes, as well as voiced opposition at board meetings.

The plan would involve the closure of seven schools by the end of the 2023 school year as a component of roughly \$50 million in budget cuts over two years. Parker Elementary and Community Day School already held their last day of classes at the end of the 2022 school year. The group occupying Parker Elementary organized and operated a free summer program for children in the neighborhood under the name “Parker Community School.”

Officials from OUSD and demonstrators have made conflicting claims about the start of the confrontation between security guards and protesters. OUSD spokesperson John Sasaki alleged that guards found the building empty on Thursday, and OUSD staff changed the locks and set an alarm before protesters somehow reentered the building.

Members of the occupation have stated that they were informed that staff were coming to relocate items from

the building to other schools but did not know they would be locked out of the building. They then mobilized members of the community in order to reestablish the occupation.

Regardless of the exact chain of events, it is clear that OUSD guards attempted to end the occupation through physical force. Demonstrators have posted numerous videos on social media, in which guards—who are easily identifiable by their uniforms—are shown slamming protesters into walls and tables. Other footage shows security guards twisting protesters’ arms behind their backs.

Among the parents attacked by guards was Max Orozco, who is currently running for the District 2 school board seat. Initial reports via social media indicated that Orozco had been handcuffed by OUSD security and locked inside the building. Protesters can be seen in one video chanting “Let Max go, now!” Orozco later was taken to the East Oakland police station where he gave a statement.

The following day, parents involved in the Parker Community School held a press conference during which they demanded the school board investigate the incident and reported that two board members had not been notified beforehand that security guards were being sent to the school.

In what could only be taken as a threat of future action from the district, Sasaki issued a statement on Friday that says, “the individuals at Parker have been and continue to trespass. We have directed them to leave from day one and have continued to do so on many other occasions.”

Sasaki’s statement and the decision to send guards to manhandle protesters reflects a growing concern among OUSD officials that opposition to school closures is getting out of hand, and the continued occupation at

Parker could become a rallying point against future school closures as classes begin throughout the OUSD system on August 8.

The California political establishment is also concerned that the occupation at Parker could be a precursor to other occupations and protests against draconian austerity policies in other districts. Both San Francisco Unified School District and West Contra Costa County School District are expected to face over \$100 million each in budgetary deficits over the next few school years. In order to carry out the closures, administrators and bureaucrats are seeking some guarantee that opposition to the closures can either be misdirected or repressed.

During the confrontation with OUSD guards and throughout demonstrations, students, teachers and parents have shown an immense bravery and dedication to oppose the closure of schools and defend public education in Oakland. Their courage, however, has been continually misdirected by protest leaders back into appeals and pressure on the Democratic Party, which for decades has systematically dismantled public education in the Bay Area and the United States.

In February, two teachers, Moses Omolade and Maurice Andre San-Chez, engaged in an 18-day hunger strike that culminated in both educators speaking at a Board of Education meeting. At the meeting, Omolade took the opportunity to hail “people in positions of power,” which in Oakland would almost exclusively be Democratic politicians, and formally ended his hunger strike. At the same meeting, the board voted to reject a proposal to delay the school closures.

Later in April, the Oakland Education Association (OEA) held a one-day strike of more than 2,000 teachers. The OEA limited the strike by conducting it under the framework of an unfair labor practice (ULP), based on the claim that OUSD had not provided adequate time for schools and families impacted by the school closures. OEA President Keith Brown also bemoaned that the closures would disproportionately impact African American and Hispanic students.

The OEA, however, made no real attempt to challenge the school closures, which would have seen them in direct conflict with the Democrats at every level of government. Instead, the OEA has enforced the Democrats’ demands for a return to in-person instruction in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic,

resulting in large-scale illness and absences among teachers and students. With the school year starting again on Monday during a surge of COVID hospitalizations alongside the deepening monkeypox pandemic, the conditions confronting teachers and students are dire.

The struggles of teachers, parents and students have coincided with strikes, protests and contract disputes among other sections of workers. Among these struggles have been the strike of roughly 5,000 nurses at Stanford in April, protests of truckers at the Port of Oakland, and the continued decision of the unions to leave dockworkers and Sutter nurses on the job without a contract for months.

The WSWs encourages all those that genuinely oppose the attack on public education in Oakland to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee in order to connect the fight against school closures with other sections of the working class.



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