

Contra Costa County educators move towards a potential strike over pay and class sizes

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The WSWs encourages all educators concerned about rampant austerity and the continued spread of COVID-19 to attend the meeting “NO to Another School Year of Mass Infection, Death and Austerity,” which will take place on Saturday, August 27 at 2PM ET.

Roughly 90 teachers from the Contra Costa County Office of Education (CCCOE), in the San Francisco Bay Area, could be headed for a strike after months of negotiations between administrators and the Contra Costa County Schools Education Association (CCCSEA), an affiliate of the California Teachers Association (CTA).

According to CCCSEA president Christina Morabe, the main sticking points in the negotiation between the district and union have been inadequate pay increases and the administration’s refusal to agree to a cap on class sizes. The CCCSEA is currently asking for a 5 percent pay increase—below the 8.5 percent inflation rate—and some limitation on class sizes.

The contract under negotiation is for the previous 2021-2022 school year, with teachers currently working without a contract. Morabe has told the WSWs that the administration recently filed for a fact finding investigation with a mediator, which could delay any possible strike action until November. The investigation would not start until October and could likely last 40 to 50 days.

The current working conditions, which teachers will be forced to work under in the meantime, pose a serious danger. Since the beginning of the pandemic, over 17 percent of the population of Contra Costa County (or 260,905 people) have officially contracted COVID-19, resulting in 1,399 documented deaths.

While Contra Costa County includes multiple school districts that work under CCCOE chief executive

officer, Lynn Mackey, the CCCOE is also its own district that accepts students with special needs who have transferred from neighboring districts. The roughly 370 students have a wide range of special needs ranging from severe autism, physical and development disabilities, emotional issues, as well as students with criminal records or are currently incarcerated.

Morabe told the WSWs, “Around Christmas time a student brought a gun to school, which we didn’t know about. After school, he attempted a carjacking and shot himself in the leg and discarded the gun on school grounds, the administration handled this without informing the teachers.

“A different student, who after reading his file I didn’t think would be a good fit for our program, was brought in. There was later an incident with this student where a teacher had to be out of the classroom from August to January due to a concussion.”

She also explained that due to a lack of teachers and the lack of protections under the previous contract negotiated by the CCCSEA, the administrators are currently doubling class sizes.

Tera, a general education teacher, explained some of the challenges facing educators in the Bay Area. “I am a general teacher, and my class size is 19 students. It is not amazing but it is doable. My students are put in my class for several different reasons, but most have not had good experiences with administrators, other teachers, and those that they see as part of the system. I need to build a relationship with each of them.

“I love my kids [students], and worry about if they are coming to school hungry. But, teachers also have to live and it is harder to teach if you are not sure if you will be able to pay your electric bill.

“I have four jobs. I’ve worked as a teacher for 11

years, I work for Doordash, I tutor and I am occasionally called in to help teach English as a second language to adults.

“I would like to buy a house some day, but I don’t see how I could afford it here. I help my mother, who is on SSI to pay for her medication. The price of gas is going up, and that carries over to food costs. Everything seems to be going up, except my pay.”

In the face of the extremely difficult working and teaching conditions, school districts have responded with an open attack on public education. In March the CCCOE and state assessors recommended that West Contra Costa Unified School District layoff at least 200 employees as part of a cost cutting measure to mitigate a \$24 million budget shortfall. This proposal was narrowly voted down.

In February of this year, a strike action vote by educators in Contra Costa, was authorized by 72 percent, and which was then prevented by the United Teachers of Richmond (UTR) after many educators independently organized mass sick outs. The teachers, who fought for increased staffing, pay and COVID safety measures, were handed a tentative agreement which did not fully meet the staffing, class size or mitigation measures demanded.

Schools in Contra Costa have been devastated by the effects of the pandemic. During the January wave, public education was severely limited with dozens of classrooms closed due to infections. The infection rate was so bad that many open classrooms were often left nearly empty with both teachers and students out sick.

Similar issues have emerged within the nearby Oakland Unified School District (OUSD), where the school board has moved to close seven schools by the end of 2023. The proposed closure has resulted in widespread backlash from teachers, students and the broader community, which have largely fallen on deaf ears and overt hostility from the political establishment. OUSD security guards recently attempted to end an occupation of one of the closed schools through force earlier this month, slamming activists into walls and tables.

In virtually every case, the unions have responded by attempting to dissipate anger, or channel it back behind the Democratic Party—which in California would be the ones carrying out the cuts. In the case of the Oakland Education Association (OEA), the union has responded

by appealing for the closures to be delayed and carried out more equitably.

At the same time, the largest teachers unions—American Federation of Teachers and National Education Association (NEA), which the OEA and CCCSEA are affiliated with—played a pivotal role in helping the Biden administration reopen schools amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Earlier this week, the Columbus Education Association in Ohio shutdown a strike of 4,500 teachers, without showing them a contract.



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