

# Oakland public schools face drastic cuts in the face of massive budget deficit

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Teachers in Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) have been working without a contract since October of last year. Under the impact of the ongoing pandemic, soaring inflation and continuous budget cuts, the conditions in Oakland schools are deteriorating. With the district seeking to close a \$79 million deficit, the right to a public education is under threat.

In their latest bargaining update, the Oakland Education Association (OEA) demanded a 23 percent raise, with pay renegotiated yearly through the 2024-25 school year. OUSD instead proposed a 4.5 percent raise, less than the inflation rate in the San Francisco Bay Area of 6 percent. Even the OEA's pay proposal would do little to fix teacher's salaries after the effective pay cut imposed by the last contract.

Four years ago (2019) this month, Oakland teachers voted by 95 percent to authorize a strike. They had been without a contract since July 2017 and inflation was steadily eroding their living standards. Three thousand teachers walked off their jobs, and the 34,000 students as well as the community overwhelmingly supported the strike. But after seven days on strike, the OEA bureaucracy rammed through a contract with raises of 11 percent over the three years of the agreement. In 2021, the union agreed on a contract extension with a 1.6 percent raise.

Since the teachers' 2016 raise, California has reported a 24.8 percent increase in the consumer price index. That amounts to an effective pay cut of 12 percent! In addition, the OEA apparatus agreed to district budget cuts of \$22 million and the closure of Roots International Academy. The settlement infuriated teachers, students and parents, and set the stage for future school closures and budget cuts.

At the beginning of this school year, OUSD ordered the closure of five schools to eliminate a looming deficit. The Oakland school board, under widespread pressure from

parents and teachers, voted on January 11 to rescind the closures. Two days later, the superintendent of Alameda County Office of Education, Alysse Castro, sent a warning letter to the board. She downgraded the financial rating of the district to "qualified." This politically-engineered insolvency of OUSD brings the district one step closer to state receivership.

Castro has given them an ultimatum: balance the budget by March 1. She and the state-appointed trustee, Luz Cázares, expect severe budget cuts, potentially including more school closures. In addition, the physical infrastructure of the OUSD has been deteriorating for a decade, as the district has ignored the master plan of \$3.2 billion worth of repairs. The maintenance program was not budgeted for five years and \$5.2 million was removed from the existing fund.

With deteriorating structures and outmoded ventilation systems, the health of students and staff continues to be at risk. The exceptional health measures implemented at the World Economic Forum at Davos, Switzerland last month reveal the attitudes of world leaders and other privileged attendees: COVID-19 is a real threat, but those who aren't rich are expendable. The OEA bargaining update does not even mention COVID-19, which continues to kill over 400 people across the country every day. Resumption of in-person schooling, supported by teachers union bureaucrats, was a major cause of the exodus of teachers from their profession and the current nationwide shortage of teachers.

The financial disaster in Oakland is not an exception. The Contra Costa County Office of Education, also in the San Francisco Bay Area, has downgraded West Contra Costa County Unified School District (WCCUSD) to "qualified" status and is demanding severe cuts.

The crisis in public education is extensive in California. The Democratic-controlled state legislature and Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom have been starving

public schools while pushing for privatization. Despite having the most billionaires of any state in America, Newsom has predicted a massive \$22 billion shortfall. But the Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO) is even more pessimistic: "Our estimates suggest that there is a good chance that revenues will be lower than the administration's projections for the budget window, particularly 2022-23 and 2023-24." This conclusion was released a month ago, before the surge in tech layoffs were announced. These layoffs will exacerbate the loss of income and will hurt the state unemployment fund.

Newsom has already slashed arts programs and transitional kindergarten support. The LAO has called for more cuts in education, and those are likely to be enacted. Schools rely on a state program, Local Control Funding Formula, for 69 percent of their funding. This not only has a cap based on 2007-08 levels, but will shrink with a weak state economy. More funds are granted through Proposition 98, which was originally presented as a minimum funding level, but has instead become a ceiling. Funding is based on enrollment and attendance, which have been declining. As a result, communities will suffer.

Newsom's policies are in step with the views of President Biden and national Democratic legislators who have voted for ever-larger defense budgets for decades. This year, the United States will spend more on defense than the next nine countries combined. Little money is left over for social programs, for health, for education. The Democrats, including the Democratic Socialists of America, have consistently voted for record military budgets and agreed to throw billions into the proxy war in Ukraine, threatening nuclear destruction. Biden admits, "We have not faced the prospect of Armageddon since Kennedy and the Cuban Missile Crisis."

Though news media has covered the OUSD budget crisis, the OEA has maintained complete silence. Alysse Castro, the superintendent demanding budget cuts, was enthusiastically endorsed by OEA president Keith Brown.

Teachers' unions have given millions to Democratic politicians. The California Teachers Association (CTA) has donated over \$2 million to candidates in the last four years. In 2018, they gave Gavin Newsom \$58,400 for his gubernatorial campaign. This past year, California teachers' unions spent \$2.8 million on board races. The statewide donations are dwarfed by the National Education Association (NEA), which spent \$23,086,216 on candidates in 2022 and \$2,190,000 on lobbying. Neither organization neglected their leaders. NEA

President Becky Pringle pocketed \$534,243 last year and the CTA manager and president received \$418,791 and \$261,000, respectively.

Brown also wants to keep Oakland teachers separated from the 1,700 members of United Teachers of Richmond (UTR) in the WCCUSD, who just voted by 97.3 percent to authorize a strike. The OEA officials presents the struggle as simply a local contract issue. But teachers are not just facing the Oakland Unified School Board, they are facing the state government and entire Democratic Party responsible for the explosion of charter schools and decades-long underfunding of education. During the last strike, as soon as the district put its foot down, the OEA apparatus fought striking teachers to enforce budget cuts and school closures, telling teachers that there was no money for better pay and conditions. They are preparing to do the same this contract.

This shows that teachers can only win the conditions they deserve in a fight against the very "progressive" Democrats the OEA campaigned for, as well as the union bureaucracy itself.

To defend students' social right to a quality public education, teachers must break out of the austerity budget that both the union officialdom and district agree to. The formation of rank-and-file committees independent of the union, is essential to rally educators, students, families and workers throughout the state in the demand for the full funding of education. Educators in California have fought bravely for decent pay and benefits but have been consistently sabotaged by union support for the very same politicians attacking education.



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