

Oakland, California teachers hold wildcat sickout in support of Los Angeles schools strike

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On Friday, hundreds of Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) teachers carried out a wildcat strike in support of Los Angeles school workers, who had just concluded a three-day strike and against low wages and poor working conditions. Roughly 400 teachers from 14 different schools took part in rallies in the morning at school sites across the district before holding a central demonstration downtown.

The Los Angeles schools strike involved 65,000 school workers and teachers, making it the largest strike in the US since 2019. However, it was limited to only three days by the Service Employees International Union Local 99 and United Teachers Los Angeles, who sent strikers back to work Friday morning without any of their demands being met. The SEIU has kept its members on the job without a new contract for three years; the UTLA, since last summer.

Later Friday evening, the SEIU announced a tentative agreement which falls far short of even the limited demands officially raised by the union bureaucracy. Over four years, pay for school support workers would rise from \$28,000 to the still-poverty level of \$33,000.

Teachers in Oakland have been kept on the job without a contract since October by the bureaucracy of the Oakland Education Association. After decades of Democrats promoting charter schools and defunding education, conditions are even worse in the district than those which led to the last citywide schools strike at OUSD in 2019. Since the OEA rammed through a contract to end that strike, the real wages of Oakland teachers have dropped by 12 percent. Under the impact of inflation and student loans, teachers have struggled to make ends meet.

Jazmine, a middle school teacher at Unite for Success

Academy (UFSA), said: "My family is working class and it took me a long time to get my credentials. So even though I've been working in education for a really long time, I'm still only on the second step of the district's pay scale. So I'm living in a two-bedroom apartment with like four people and I'm an adult, you know, I'm 31 years old I'm trying to start my life and it's just very impossible."

Another teacher at UFSA, Michael, had a message for workers in Los Angeles. "I hope they stay strong. I feel like we're aligned and if we can do this together it would be even better. We want a statewide strike, the goal is from LA to Oakland. This is the time, you know, and we're here to make history. Hopefully our students understand that and they can take part as well."

"Hell yeah," Jazmine added. "I mean we're fighting and we will not stop. We're going to change the direction of public education because it's what our students need."

"A big thing that we're facing right now is that we have a bathroom upstairs that leaks sewage water into one of the classrooms," Jazmine explained, "and then downstairs the boys bathrooms sprays out sewage water from the drain hole. The janitorial staff is expected to push it back in, clean it and then reopen the bathroom for business as usual, rinse and repeat, rinse and repeat. It keeps happening because they're not actually fixing the root of the problem, which is the pipes. The district is just patching very old pipes and then having people go about their day, but what's really needed is a complete update to the facilities."

OUSD is currently facing a \$79 million budget deficit and is claiming that there is no money to pay decent

salaries. Oakland school board President Michael Hutchinson and Alameda County Superintendent Alysse Castro are demanding widespread cuts and layoffs. Hutchinson was endorsed by OEA President Keith Brown, and SEIU local 1021 campaigned for his most recent election. OEA Vice President Ismael Armendariz endorsed Castro for superintendent.

The school board's plan to balance the budget includes cutting dozens of school staff positions in SEIU local 1021, focused primarily on early literacy, special education and case managers. The board and county superintendent are all agreed that any raise for teachers will mean further cuts, layoffs or school closures elsewhere. The proposals include cuts to the district's refugee and asylee program which could be disastrous for Oakland's international student population.

"Because of the US imperialism's role in Latin American countries," Jazmine said, "people are [migrating to the United States] and we have a growing population of students who are new to the country and are sort of just pushed along each year through their education, not fully understanding what's going on in the classroom. Luckily some of us speak Spanish but there are students coming from Yemen, there are students coming from all over, and it's really sad because these students need more. I'm not trained to handle that but somehow I find a way. You have to find a way because there's never funding for exactly what these students need."

In an effort to contain the grassroots militancy expressed in Friday's wildcat strike, the OEA filed an unfair labor practices complaint against the district Thursday afternoon. The union leadership hopes to channel teachers and school workers' legitimate economic demands into a dead end plea for the district to "bargain in good faith" while fully accepting the school board's demand for overall budget cuts.

In order to win the conditions that they deserve, teachers in Oakland need to unite with school workers across union and district lines and form independent rank-and-file committees.

During the 2019 strike, teachers in Oakland formed a rank-and-file committee which exposed the union leadership's support for budget cuts, fought for a no vote to the contract locking teachers into below inflation raises and campaigned for a joint strike with

other districts like Los Angeles, San Francisco and New Haven. That work must be continued and expanded.



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