

Oakland, California teachers authorize strike action, amid growing frustration with union bureaucracy

David Brown
25 April 2023

Are you an Oakland teacher? Tell us how you voted in the strike ballot and why. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

On Monday, teachers in Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) voted by 88 percent to 12 to approve a limited strike, which could start as early as May 1. Voter turnout was 87 percent.

The vote follows a one-day wildcat strike by teachers in March taken in solidarity with the three-day district-wide strike of educators in Los Angeles. Oakland teachers are looking for an end to school closures, better staffing, and a significant pay raise to offset years of cuts. Arrayed against them are the city, county and state officials demanding large budget cuts, and the union apparatus which is trying to limit teachers' demands to "good faith bargaining."

On March 23, the day before the wildcat strike, the Oakland Education Association (OEA) filed an unfair labor practices complaint against the district that forms the technical basis for the proposed May Day strike. The union's complaint addresses none of the teachers' actual demands and is focused entirely on bargaining timelines and comments by the school board.

The seven-day strike of Oakland teachers in 2019 was also called on an Unfair Labor Practice basis, a category which places limits on teachers' abilities to raise economic demands. The current OEA leadership used that as a bludgeon against teacher demands to fight budget cuts, school closures, and more nursing staff. For the sake of "bargaining in good faith," the union accepted more than \$22 million in budget cuts voted by the school board just one day after the union rammed through the sellout agreement.

Oakland teachers have been working without a

contract since the last agreement expired in October. Students and staff suffered sharply under the last contract, which was hailed as a "significant victory" by the union leadership as well as the Democratic Socialists of America. Taking inflation into account, real wages for teachers have dropped by 12 percent over that contract, while one school, ROOTS International Academy was closed, and schools remained woefully understaffed.

The district budget has been shaped by decades of cuts and pro-charter school policies of Democratic politicians, enthusiastically endorsed by the unions bureaucracy. The state and county superintendents of public education, Tony Thurmond and Alysse Castro, as well as the school board president, Mike Hutchinson, were all endorsed by current OEA interim president Ismael Armendariz.

These politicians are all demanding severe budget cuts to close a predicted \$79 million budget shortfall. They are agreed that any raise for teachers must mean further cuts, layoffs or school closures elsewhere. Despite being elected to the school board on a wave of protests specifically opposing school closures, Hutchinson reversed course, calling it the "reality" of planning a budget. The board's plan to balance the budget includes closing up to 10 schools and cutting dozens of jobs for site staff in SEIU Local 1021, focused primarily on early literacy, special education and case managers. The proposed cuts to the district's refugee and asylee program could be disastrous for Oakland's international student population.

The conditions in Oakland Unified are part of a broader, bipartisan attack on education that is being resisted by teachers across the country and

internationally. Districts from New York to Texas are facing sharp budget cuts as the brief and inadequate federal pandemic funding runs out. Democratic Party-controlled California as a whole was short roughly 50,000 teachers this school year. At the start of the year, the Educators Rank-and-File Committee explained the need to reach out beyond the district straitjacket and organize workers independently of the unions:

Educators must take stock of the lessons of the entire experience of the pandemic and the preceding four decades, which proved that the trade union bureaucracies function as corporatist agencies bound to the Democratic Party. Headed by multi-millionaires like Weingarten and staffed by thousands of upper-middle-class bureaucrats who net salaries far above that of the average teacher, they defend the capitalist system and their privileged positions in society....

To fight for their interests, educators must establish political and organizational independence through the building and expansion of rank-and-file committees across the US and internationally. These committees, which have been formed by educators, autoworkers, Amazon workers and other sections of the working class, represent the interests of the working class in direct opposition to the dictates of the ruling elites, who intend to cut public education to the bone.

Ordinary teachers in Oakland are widely distrustful of the union officialdom. There is currently a petition circulating demanding a full membership meeting to hammer out a strike plan, rather than one worked out on the whims of the executive board. Among the site representatives there is an oppositional group calling themselves the Rank and File caucus which has criticized the OEA executives for refusing to share their analysis of the district's budget. But this group limits themselves to tactical advice to the union leadership on the precise time to call a strike and vague calls for "union democracy."

The only social force capable of winning the demands of teachers, students and staff is the working class, which can only be mobilized through a political fight that rejects the petty bounds of district by district negotiations. The objective conditions facing teachers across the country are significantly worse for teachers than in 2019 when statewide strikes erupted in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona.

Right now teachers in Los Angeles are facing a union-backed tentative agreement with raises barely meeting inflation. Teachers in San Francisco are protesting for higher wages, while teachers in San Rafael authorized a strike by 99 percent. The objective conditions are there for a statewide and even nationwide strike for the full funding of public education, but it requires rank-and-file committees to organize independently of the union bureaucracy and both big business parties.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact