

Oakland, California teachers to strike Thursday

David Brown
3 May 2023

Are you an Oakland teacher? Tell us what conditions are like at your school and what you're fighting for in this week's strike. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

The Oakland Education Association (OEA) has announced an Unfair Labor Practices (ULP) strike starting this Thursday. The 3,000 teachers in the district have been working without a contract since October and are demanding raises to overcome sharp pay cuts from inflation and better funding for schools.

OUSD is currently planning significant layoffs, school closures and other cuts to close an estimated \$79 million budget deficit. But teachers looking to fight these conditions are confronting not just the Democratic politicians from the local to federal level who have been pushing charter schools and austerity, but the union bureaucracy that is collaborating with the district to defuse opposition to the cuts.

The OEA has falsely claimed there is a “fair contract” to be had if only the school board would “bargain in good faith,” and has purposely excluded any economic demands from the strike. But the very politicians that OEA claims are not bargaining in good faith are those that the union helped elect, and they are adamant that any gains for teachers be offset with layoffs, budget cuts and school closures.

OUSD school board president Mike Hutchinson was first elected in 2020 with the support of former OEA president Keith Brown and current interim president Ismael Armendariz. Despite being elected as a vocal opponent of school closures, he put school closures back on the table this year to balance the budget. The Alameda County superintendent, Alysse Castro (endorsed by Armendariz), has also called for roughly \$110 million in cuts over the next two years and downgraded the financial rating of the district to

“qualified,” bringing it one step closer to state receivership.

The OUSD budget might lose an additional \$10 million due to AB1840, which tied some state funding to measures like school closures. That bill was backed by current State Superintendent of public education Tony Thurmond (also endorsed by Armendariz).

In their email announcing the strike, the OEA bureaucracy pleaded with the district to join with it to avert a strike, declaring: “There is still time for the District to do the right thing. We want to settle.”

But all indications are that the Oakland school district is digging in its heels. OUSD has already sought unsuccessfully to obtain an injunction against the strike from the state's Public Employment Relations Board.

This is in sharp contrast to the determined mood among rank-and-file teachers. Last month, 400 teachers took part in a wildcat strike. In response, and to keep the growing discontent from escaping its control, the OEA apparatus called a strike vote last week, where teachers authorized a strike by 88 percent. Over the weekend, the OEA praised “progress” being made at the bargaining table but felt compelled to set a strike date when no deal had materialized by Monday.

The conditions confronting teachers are significantly worse now than before the last strike in 2019, when Oakland teachers were out for seven days. Under the terms of the sellout agreement reached to end that strike, teacher pay fell in real terms by 12 percent. In other words, it would take an immediate 12 percent across the board raise just to bring teachers up to their pay under the previous contract.

Oakland teachers are some of the lowest paid in the Bay Area overall and this has led to consistently high turnover rates. On average, one in five teachers leave the district every year. This in turn drives a lack of

credentialed teachers or sufficient support staff. Last school year, just under two-thirds of Oakland teachers were fully credentialed, dropping to only half for special education teachers.

But these conditions are hardly unique. California began this school year with a shortage of roughly 50,000 teachers. Districts across the state are preparing massive budget cuts, as inadequate COVID emergency funding ends. As in 2018 and 2019, when teachers launched a wave of strikes in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona, as well as in Los Angeles and Oakland, there is broad public support for teachers to wage a real struggle against the bipartisan attacks on public education.

In 2019 a statewide strike in California was bitterly opposed by the teachers unions. Once again, the California Teachers Association is trying to keep teachers isolated by district. As Oakland teachers head out on strike, Los Angeles teachers are voting on a tentative agreement being pushed by United Teachers Los Angeles with meager pay raises, no real gains in staffing, and the green light for more charter schools.

There is enormous potential for the Oakland teachers to link up with educators and workers throughout the region, including 22,000 dockworkers who have been kept on the job without a contract since last summer and UPS workers whose contract expires on July 31. But this requires that teachers form rank-and-file committees independent of the union bureaucracies. One of the first tasks for teachers is to break out of this isolation and unite across district lines.

Teachers must reject the starvation budgets that form the basis of “good faith bargaining” and instead fight for what school workers and students need. A raise for teachers is meaningless if the district pays for it through cuts to other staff and student services.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact