

3,000 Oakland, California teachers begin strike

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A strike of roughly 3,000 teachers in Oakland, California, began on Thursday, May 4, mostly shuttering the 34,000-student Oakland Unified School District (OUSD). Oakland teachers are fighting against the impact of decades of budget cuts by the Democratic Party which have left schools woefully understaffed, with decaying buildings, grossly insufficient salaries, as well as the perpetual circulation of COVID-19 in schools.

The Alameda County superintendent, Alysse Castro (who was endorsed by the Oakland Education Association teachers union's interim President Ismael Armendariz), is calling for \$110 million in cuts under threat of state receivership. In addition, OUSD may lose another \$10 million due to California Assembly Bill 1840, backed by Armendariz-endorsed Tony Thurmond, the Democratic state superintendent of public education, which ties funding to school closures. These factors have led OUSD school board President Mike Hutchinson, also Armendariz-endorsed, to reverse his previous opposition to school closures in the name of a balanced budget.

Under these government-dictated rules, any gains by teachers in this contract will be funded through cuts in other areas, as is already being done at the University of California system following last year's graduate student strike. Despite OEA's calls to "chop from the top," cutting administrative staff can only go so far. It is clear that meeting the basic needs of OUSD's teachers and students will require allocating additional resources to the district.

Despite these dire conditions, the Oakland Education Association (OEA) union is attempting to keep the strike within the straitjacket of an unfair labor practices (ULP) action, in which teachers are not allowed to raise demands for increased wages, staffing or improved working conditions. In a ULP, the only demand a union and its members can make is that the district bargain in "good faith." As a result, the OEA is nominally on strike only because the district's latest proposal was supposedly confusing and incomplete.

OUSD and the school board have seized on OEA's weak

and convoluted ULP justification, sending a series of emails to parents and communications to the press showcasing self-serving talking points from their latest proposal, delivered Wednesday, the night before the strike.

Michael, a seventh-grade humanities teacher at United for Success Academy (UFSA), described the reality of the social crisis facing many students in the deeply impoverished East Oakland. "I have an average of a third-grade reading level for my seventh-grade students. We're here for these students. We're standing here, doing what we're doing, fighting for the kids. We're trying to get them on par with the rest of the country, with the rest of Oakland, and it's not happening."

Michael also noted that UFSA suffered a months-long rat infestation, which the district only recently attempted to resolve. Educators at Fremont High School noted that the air conditioning system was out for as long as twelve days during the fall heat wave of 2022. One teacher described bringing a carbon dioxide monitor into their poorly-ventilated classroom after noting unusual drowsiness and other symptoms of high carbon dioxide levels.

A striking physical education teacher at Fremont High School described the enormous class sizes educators are expected to teach. "I have a class of 62. The insane part is they allow 50 students. I teach newcomers, so 50 of my students don't speak English. I do a lot of scaffolding." She expressed concern over the union's current demands, "They [OEA] are not asking for lower PE class sizes this year."

Michael continued: "In our low-income communities, this is the type of student that we have. I have about half my students with IEPs (individualized education plans), and this honestly is just not fair. We need services to make things better and to do what's right by these students. It's our responsibility to make sure the district is held accountable for providing these students what they need."

Michael described the extreme workloads facing staff such as psychologists, who are critical for ensuring students with individualized needs get the right support. "When you look at the numbers of what each psychologist is asked to handle,

case workers, we're talking about case loads of 25 to 1 per day. The numbers are ridiculous."

"Most of our school population is Latino," Michael continued, "and there's a lot of interpretation that has to go on, a lot of translation. There's a big number of newcomers [immigrants] coming in, and they get lost in the system. I have one student in particular who's been a newcomer student for four years now, and we just learned he doesn't know how to read or write. And now he's going to get thrown out of that system because it's only four years that you can be in there and he has nowhere to go. These are the kinds of services we're talking about, reading specialists. That kid actually speaks Mam [a Guatemalan indigenous language]. He doesn't speak Spanish, so we have bigger hurdles to go through."

Despite the clear need for an expansion of individualized educational services, the district recently eliminated the special day class for high-needs students at UFSA. "They cut the class by emailing the parents saying they needed to find a new school. We found out when the parents came here crying, asking, 'Why is my kid being moved from this school?' after they found a home, a place where they feel comfortable to come in every day. The district did send a person to help relocate the students, but he had no answers to their questions.

"We also had cuts at our ELD [English language development] program, where the teachers were notified the day before spring break at 10 p.m. at night so there would be nobody to complain to."

Asked how teachers survive on their current salaries, Michael explained, "Most teachers have side gigs. A lot of new teachers tend to live in shared apartments where they rent the room because they can't afford the rent. It's unlivable conditions. This is what we're talking about, humanizing the actual process. You have to treat us like humans. We are one of the most expensive districts to live in in the Bay, but our teachers are the least paid."

Median rent for a 1-bedroom apartment in Oakland is \$2,150 per month, or \$25,800 per year, roughly half a new OUSD teacher's starting salary of \$52,905. The current district proposal would increase this to \$63,604 per year by the end of the contract, still leaving starting teachers heavily rent-burdened. This pay increase is only a few percentage points off from the OEA's own proposal.

"Teachers are leaving because they can't afford to stay here. And we need quality teachers to stay. These kids deserve to see the same faces every year, not come back and wonder who's next, or the teacher name on their record says vacancy. This is what the students see. This is not what we want to do."

Speaking of conditions facing paraeducators, who support

teachers while making less than fast food employees, "I really don't know how they do it. Their salary is horrible. I have much respect for them. A lot of them are single moms. I've seen them when we have them here. And they're smiling all the time. They come in and provide the individual support that teachers can't because we're teaching. And then to go home to God knows what conditions.

"Definitely we don't have enough [paraeducators]. I see a paraeducator in my class maybe two times a week. But I see the students with IEPs five times a week."

Resources clearly exist to fix crumbling classrooms, lower class sizes, hire enough teachers and other needed support staff and pay educators a dignified wage. At the drop of a hat, the Biden administration found tens of billions of dollars to fund its war against Russia in Ukraine and bail out faltering banks, and both parties have funneled trillions of dollars into Wall Street.

But a real fight to win needed funding for public education is incompatible with the bankrupt approach of the OEA bureaucracy, which is to limit and isolate teachers and to appeal for support from the same Democrats who, no less than Republicans, are attacking public education all over the country.

The way forward is for rank-and-file teachers to organize themselves independently of the bureaucracy and fight for rank-and-file control against the district, the union apparatus and the two-party system. There is clearly pent-up anger and frustration among Oakland teachers, many of whom carried out wildcat sickouts last month which shut down several schools. This opposition must be deepened and organized into a rank-and-file strike committee which does not accept the limited ULP framework and organizes teachers around clear demands based on what workers need, not what the district and the government say they can afford.

Most importantly, these committees must develop lines of communication with other teachers and workers, particularly educators in Los Angeles Unified School District, who are currently voting on a poverty contract. In addition, in the Bay Area, educators will find ready allies among health care workers, who continue to face crippling and traumatic workloads amid an ongoing pandemic, and 22,000 dockworkers, including those at the ports of Oakland and San Francisco, who have been without a contract for nearly a year.



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