Momentum builds on second day of Oakland teachers' strike

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6 May 2023

As the strike by approximately 3,000 teachers in the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) in California entered its second day Friday a groundswell of teachers, students, and their families took to the streets of Oakland, voicing their demands for improved wages and denouncing the budget cuts that endanger the future of even more schools. In the face of educators' demonstrated militancy, the Oakland Education Association (OEA) union is struggling to keep the strike within the highly restrictive bounds of an unfair labor practices (ULP) strike, demanding only that the district "bargain in good faith."

The hundreds-strong mass demonstration, encompassing families with children of all ages, garnered significant support, shutting down roads en route to Josie de la Cruz park.

A militant mood was evident among teachers, parents, and students, demanding improved wages, staffing, and necessary services such as reliable and safe transportation to school and services for the district's substantial homeless population.

However, the OEA speakers avoided raising these critical demands. Instead, union representatives were careful to keep the strike within the highly restrictive bounds of a ULP strike, in which workers are not allowed to demand anything other than that an employer "bargain in good faith."

Attempting to posture as militant, OEA negotiators staged a protest Friday morning outside the house of OUSD School Board president Mike Hutchinson, previously endorsed by OUSD interim president Ishmael Armendariz. During this face off, both sides claimed that they were willing to negotiate, but the other was not. The nominal sticking point is OEA's Common Good proposals, which include demands for improved student transportation as well as services for the district's homeless students.

Demands for student transportation and services for homeless students are fully justified, as it is nearly impossible to teach students who require these services, but do not have access to them.

The district and school board legalistically claim they cannot negotiate on these questions within a teacher employment contract, citing the fact that doing so would cost money at a time when they are complying with government edicts to slash budgets. OEA claims that this refusal by the district to negotiate on these points constitutes bad-faith bargaining. This posturing leaves the legality of the strike in the hands of the courts, which have not yet ruled on the merits of OEA's ULP claims, leaving open the risk that the strike may be declared illegal.

The farce of this Kabuki theater is exposed by the fact that Oakland teachers are without a contract and would be perfectly within their rights to hold an economic strike, not beholden to the labor courts. In such a circumstance, teachers could strike for as long as necessary for their just demands.

However, the union deliberately cut off the option of an economic strike by refusing to declare an impasse. The result is a constricted strike at the mercy of judges appointed by the same Democratic Party that is demanding over $100 million in cuts.

In stark contrast to the union's phony posturing, the teachers participating in yesterday's protest spoke with anger and determination, unequivocally denounced the ghastly working conditions they confront on a daily basis, stemming from chronic understaffing or inadequate support and resources.

Rebecca, a 7th grade history teacher at Bret Harte Middle School, described the staffing issues teachers are facing after a decade of budget cuts. "The biggest issue is staffing. We have lost several teachers mid-year, including probably about four teachers who have quit mid-year. And then, that's not even counting teachers who've been out for medical leave. We're getting called to substitute for other teachers. We're just overwhelmed."

Describing the difficulties caused by high levels of teacher turnover, Rebecca continued, "They just can't keep teachers. And those of us who stay just have to take on all the extra work." Speaking of the inadequate level of paraeducator support, she said, "I often don't have the support I'm supposed to have. There are students with IEPs (individualized education plans) who are supposed to have push-in support (additional services provided in the classroom). So, I have a cluster of students who need support in my classroom and no one to help support."

Speaking about the most pressing demands they're raising, she commented, "We need anything that's going to keep staff here. To me, that's the most important, just keeping staff here. That includes the conditions and that includes the wages. [It also] includes safety. Everything needed to keep staff here."

She concluded by stating, "This is my 11th year teaching. I've seen a lot of people come and go. My previous school I taught at before was closed down by the district. And so, I've seen how much that jettisons teachers."

Mario, a young physical education teacher at Melrose Leadership Academy (MLA), elaborated on the dire situation: "My classes are anywhere from 60 to 70 students. It's very difficult. I have the help of another teacher, but the classes are too large for a physical education program. Normal class size is 40 to 50 maximum. But the district puts in a lot more students because they don't have the capacity."

When questioned about compensation for the increased workload, Mario revealed, "No, they pay you the same amount and just stuff more students into a single class. And on top of not getting any support for smaller classes, the physical space we get to teach is not

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big enough and they don't provide us with the sports equipment we need to conduct the classes."

He explained how teachers are left to their own devices to keep the class afloat, "We just have to improvise. Or sometimes, we just have to buy it out of pocket, so that students can have equipment."

Describing the experience of working during the pandemic in the district, he recounted, "At the beginning of the pandemic we had ten students per class. We also had masks and hand sanitizer. But all that went out the window as the months went by. We're seeing teachers get sick. Just two months ago I got sick from COVID."

Speaking about the demands raised by the teachers, he said, "It's very important that the new teachers who come to the district are paid enough to retain them. The retention of teachers is the most important thing. I've been hearing that neighboring districts are paid much more than us. And it always happens that the teachers here in Oakland, since they're not being paid appropriately, they just leave the district."

He went on to describe his experience living on a teacher's salary. "I'm single right now. I don't have children. I still live with my parents in a house, because it's impossible to rent with the salary they're giving us. Here [in Oakland], the rent is too expensive for one person. Add to that food and all the expenses that have to be paid."

Prompted about the 2019 contract that was rammed through by the union, he said, "Just today I was also commenting with a colleague about the contract they made in 2019. He told me a little, that's why I know. When they were on strike, towards the end of it, they simply had to accept, because they had to 'go back for the students.' The contract wasn't what they had asked for and what they needed. But they had to make the agreement to be able to move forward. And now we're almost in the same situation."

OEA may well attempt to repeat this performance, with union rep issuing the following appeal to the rally, "Going into the weekend you gotta stay in touch, make sure you're looking at your messages. Don't turn off and go to sleep, I know you're tired, but make sure you're checking on your messages." In recent years, multiple unions have shut down strikes by hastily conducting a ratification vote during weekends, or over holidays.

Jose Luis, a Garden and Nutrition Educator, explained the challenges teachers face: "I've worked at different schools throughout OUSD. There are a lot of challenges that teachers and students face at our schools. Class sizes are too big. We're just coming back from COVID and the kids need a lot of support. A lot of these students don't have at home the support system they need. We know how much of an impact it has later in life for the kids and for our community as a whole."

Talking about the dedication of teachers, he added, "I've been really fortunate to work with a lot of great teachers. It's the teachers who make this happen. They are the ones that go above and beyond. They're not just working 40 hours a week. A lot of times they're working Saturdays. They're working Sundays. They do this out of the kindness of their heart. Because they know that their kids need that extra support. They stay after school because they know the kids. They go out of their ways to go do home visits because they know the kids need it. This is all on the teachers."

When asked what kind of support the district provides to these teachers, he replied, "The school is not giving them anything to help to be able to do this very needed support for the community. It's something [the teachers] volunteer their time for. That's the cool thing about the teachers. But it also leads to burnout. These teachers are stressed out, super thin."

Regarding class sizes, he commented, "Class sizes range from 20 to 30 students in a class. I've gotten to work at some schools where they're a little bit below 20. But those are schools that have more resources because the PTA (Parent Teachers Association, i.e., donations by the parents of the students) provides funds. Or private funders do. This only happens in the more affluent areas, such as the ones closer to the Oakland hills. A lot of those parents are professionals, so they know that these things are important. At the end of the day, it's money."

Speaking on wages, he added, "We need a better livable wage. After COVID happened, that really shook things up. Gas prices, some teachers commute from out of town just to come in and support our students here in our community. And the food prices have increased as well. And OUSD is not taking any of this into consideration."

Oakland teachers are waging a critical fight in defense of public education. Even now, badly underfunded public schools are only held together through the immense sacrifice of overworked, underpaid educators. The over $100 million in cuts demanded by the Democrats would bring public schools one step closer to mere holding pens for the children of working class youth. The tens of billions handed out for war and bank bailouts must be redirected toward education and other vital social needs. However, this necessary transfer of wealth requires more than simply local organization.

Appeals to the Democrats, the school board, and local government will fall on deaf ears. However, the OEA is tied hand and food to the Democrats, with their parent California Teachers Association donating over $2 million to California Democrats in the past four years. These are the very politicians who have methodically dismantled public education through austerity measures and the widespread transfer of school campuses to private charter corporations.

We call on Oakland teachers and other educators to organize independently from both the Democratic party and the union apparatus by establishing rank-and-file committees, uniting with other districts, health care workers, dock workers, and beyond to fight for what educators need, not what the district says it can afford. This approach will enable them to link their efforts not only across district lines, but across industries, and furthermore, across borders. Only then can the mode of production be overhauled to prioritize human needs over the relentless and blind pursuit of profit that characterizes capitalism.

We urge all workers interested in forming rank-and-file committees to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* today.

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