Oakland teachers speak on conditions as strike continues

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Striking Oakland teachers turned out in large numbers Monday for the third day of their strike despite a cold rain. While teachers are fighting against deplorable conditions, the Oakland Education Association (OEA) has sought to limit the strike to complaints that the district is not bargaining properly. At the same time the OEA is intentionally excluding every economic demand from the strike. As the school year draws to a close, Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) is preparing significant layoffs and potential school closures to balance the district budget. *World Socialist Web Site* reporters spoke with strikers at Oakland High School and Manzanita SEED Elementary, both in impoverished east Oakland, about what is at stake.

Amy, an English teacher with four years of experience, described her passion for teaching at Oakland High, "It's a great place. The teachers are great, the admins are great. I love this job. I want these kids running society. That's why I teach, not that savior BS. I couldn't imagine doing anything else unless I literally can't afford to stay here."

Affordability is a real concern for educators in one of the most expensive regions in the world. "I'd like to not be at risk of being unhoused," Amy explained. "My wife works, but during the pandemic we were living off just my salary for a while. We did it, but we wouldn't have been able to cover an emergency."

Teachers and students have been facing sharply deteriorating conditions under the impact of the pandemic and soaring inflation as part of a broader bipartisan attack on public education. Under the last contract, teachers took a 12 percent pay cut in terms of real wages, and staffing has become nearly impossible on the poverty wages offered. OUSD has a yearly turnover rate of 20 percent. Last school year, just under two-thirds of Oakland teachers were fully credentialed, dropping to only half for special education teachers.

Amy outlined the impact of endemic teacher turnover in the district, which is a direct product of low wages: "I was hired right after the 2019 strike. A lot of teachers had left. I was hired along with two other English teachers and now I'm the only one left." This highlights just how much Oakland's students are losing as a result of unreasonably low teacher salaries.

"When I was training as a teacher, they said it takes about six years before you're really good at this job. When you're starting from scratch, each hour of class, it takes two to four hours of prep. Even four years in, I'm still exhausted on evenings and weekends."

Amy went on to describe how chronic under-resourcing severely hinders even the most dedicated teachers. "This year, the AC unit in my classroom wasn't working since August. My classroom, which doesn't have windows, maxed out at 98 degrees in the fall heat wave. Nobody can learn in those conditions. We set up a system where we periodically rotated students to classrooms where it was cooler. My wife bought me an AC unit and that got the temperature down to 75 degrees. Still hot, but manageable. I had that, two HEPA filters, and two fans in my windowless classroom.

"Rooms here have been leaking, puddles everywhere, which of course leads to mold. Other sites have had wastewater issues."

Years of major budget cuts to the district have left over $3 billion in necessary facility repairs, according to the district's facilities master plan. These conditions were exacerbated by the pandemic and the rush to throw children back into dilapidated classrooms without effective safeguards, as clearly seen in attendance figures. In the six years before the pandemic

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only 4 percent of students were “chronically absent,” but in the three years since, that rate has more than tripled to 14.1 percent.

Describing the gaping inequalities in educational access, Amy continued, “I went to a conference at a charter school in San Diego and it looked like a tech loft. Google would have been envious. They had students’ projects posted on the walls. Why can’t all public schools have that?

“If you build a school that looks like a prison, where do you think the kids are going to go?”

Rejecting the claim that there is no money for education, Amy responded, “We live in the Bay Area. It is unbelievable how much money there is here.”

Recently the school board approved a series of layoffs in support staff particularly targeting early language literacy and special education. This is part of an effort to meet the demands of the union-endorsed county and state superintendents to balance an expected $79 million deficit.

Steve, an English Language Development teacher at Oakland High, described the substantial language needs among his East Oakland school’s student body, requiring highly skilled professionals. “We have English language learners from lots of backgrounds. A lot speak Spanish, but we also have a large number of Guatemalan students, and many of them speak Mam (an indigenous language). We also have students who speak Chinese, Arabic, and I have a Dari-speaking student from Afghanistan.”

Steve highlighted the highly collaborative atmosphere his colleagues and students have worked to create in this deeply multicultural setting, noting, “We have a lot of de facto interpreters because many of the teachers and students can help translate.”

Steve explained the reasons for the strike: “There’s an idea of the passionate teacher, not doing it for the money. But we need money for groceries. We need to be paid enough to stay. Money needs to not be a problem.”

Emily, a special education teacher at Manzanita SEED elementary school, which shares a campus with Manzanita Community School, described conditions under the already threadbare budget: “We don’t have a PE teacher. Instead, teachers are just taking our kids outside to get some exercise during the day. I was just told that my SPED class will be cut in a few years.”

Pointing out the clear need for higher teacher pay, Emily noted, “We are the lowest-paid district in the region and we have the highest-paid administrators.”

Alice, a parent at Manzanita SEED Elementary whose name has been changed, described conditions at her children’s school. “It just seems so under-funded. We don’t have enough janitors. There’s trash everywhere. Our family resource coordinator is doing double-time as a school nurse. It would be really nice if we had a counselor.”

“It’s crazy that we’re sharing all these resources with an entire other school and we’re one of the few schools that is offering a dual-language education. And they’re not funding teachers. The salaries aren’t there. This is one of the most expensive areas in the country. They’re not even offering what Ohio teachers are making.”

Defending the rights of students to a quality public education and of teachers for good pay and acceptable working conditions requires a fight against the starvation budget being set out by Democrats from the local to the national level.

Are you an Oakland teacher, student or parent? For more information on building rank-and-file committees, fill out the form below.

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