

Sweetwater schools face renewed cuts as district administrators receive massive raises

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After massive budget cuts in 2020 and more than three years of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, teachers, staff and students in the Sweetwater Union High School District (SUHSD) in San Diego, California, are facing a renewed assault on their jobs and working conditions as district officials threaten a further casualization of the teaching workforce and deeper cuts to vital programs and services.

SUHSD is the largest secondary school district in California, with more than 1,500 teachers, 36,000 students, and 10,000 adult learners in southwestern San Diego County, along the US-Mexico border.

Among the programs on the chopping block are the district's last remaining learning centers, schools specifically geared toward assisting the most at-risk students with graduation and counseling services. Formerly the district ran 12 learning centers, which were utilized by large sections of students and adult learners. All 12 were initially slated to close in 2020, but public outcry and student walkouts forced the district to keep three centers open, which are now slated to close at the end of the current school year.

In addition, at least 214 teachers on temporary contracts will be let go at the end of the school year, uncertain if they will be rehired to teach in the fall and without employment or insurance over the summer. Nearly 80 of these temporary teachers were originally laid off in 2020 and have been working in the district for the past three years on continued temporary contracts, which consign teachers to perpetual job precarity.

The current cuts are taking place three years after more than \$30 million in budget cuts were imposed in 2020, which wreaked havoc on families. These included the devastating ending of bus routes and mass layoffs of teachers and support staff. The 2020 budget deficit was an estimated \$68 million dollars in "mismanaged" funds, which has yet to be fully investigated.

Despite demands from rank-and-file educators for detailed information and data on the possibility of recall for permanent positions, the district and Sweetwater Education Association (SEA) union leadership have kept this data from teachers. They have instead informed teachers that the rehire process will likely include yet another temporary contract for the upcoming school year.

The 2020 budget cuts compounded with the catastrophic impacts of the pandemic, which has exacerbated a mass teacher shortage and decline in student enrollment in public schools nationwide. As across the United States, SUHSD has failed to adequately fill

vacancies with permanent positions and is utilizing temporary contracts and long-term substitutes. The result has been a further casualization of the workforce, making it easier for the district to hire and fire teachers based on short-term need.

While earmarked for spending related to the COVID-19 pandemic, much of the federal COVID relief funds have been utilized by districts throughout the US to pay for teachers and staff on temporary contracts, as well as fund important services at school sites.

According to SUHSD's second interim report, the district was granted over \$94 million through the federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) for the 2022-23 school year. The final installment of these funds is scheduled to end in September 2024, during the next school year, creating a looming massive budget shortfall.

Millions of dollars in ESSER funds have been used to pay for important programs and positions in SUHSD, including but not limited to: school psychologists, mental health services, campus assistants, librarians, tutoring services, summer school, instructional materials, Career and Technology Education, as well as Visual and Performing Arts education, to name a few.

As these fund sources are set to dry up by 2024, districts like SUHSD will surely enact further cuts, as in the case of Detroit Public Schools and elsewhere. Continued temporary contracts will also likely be utilized, similar to the tiered workforce and unequal pay facing workers across numerous industries which have been facilitated by the unions. From the SEA to the International Longshore and Warehouse Union to the Teamsters, the union bureaucracies have all rubber-stamped the casualization of labor.

At a January school board meeting, multiple counselors in the district spoke in opposition to the closures and detailed the importance of these schools for at-risk youth. One counselor stated, "We have 360 students on our caseload. We put band-aids on students' cuts... But the programs that the learning centers provide are not just band-aids. They meet with the students one-on-one, they provide extra resources and more of the comprehensive aid these students need."

The counselor also remarked that her recent referral of a student to the San Ysidro Learning Center was denied because the learning centers are closing. She said, "I had to refer him to Palomar [another Alternative Education school], which was full, so I had to refer him to independent studies, which has a long wait list for students to get in." The counselor also noted that the learning

centers have allowed many of her students to graduate high school, attend community college and enroll in university.

According to analysis from the Hechinger Report using Department of Education data on student transfers and expulsions in 23 of the largest California school districts from 2016-21, SUHSD had the highest number of behavior-related transfers to alternative education schools. In the five-year period, there were over 5,300 student transfers to learning centers in the district.

Closing the learning centers will result in hundreds of students not graduating high school, subsequently to be pushed into low wage jobs. These closures are part of an overall assault on every child's social right to public education and access to knowledge.

The US is in the midst of a major labor supply shortage, which was itself caused by the capitalist ruling elites' refusal to protect the population from the devastating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated economic fallout. Republican-led states are increasingly passing legislation to get rid of child labor laws in order to funnel young people into the low-wage workforce.

The cuts to public education in California are being overseen by the Democratic Party, which is equally interested in funneling youth into low-wage jobs and the military. For its part, the American Federation of Teachers has responded to the labor shortage by partnering with corporations to try to funnel high school students into low-paying jobs.

Despite hours of testimony over the past three years, in which educators and students have pleaded with SUSHS officials to save the remaining centers, the district and school board formally announced in February that they will close the remaining three learning centers.

Adding insult to injury, the district and school board have found no lack of funds for massive permanent raises for central district administrators this school year. At a SUHSD board meeting this past Monday, the board approved a 6 percent raise and three-year extension of the contract for the current superintendent, Moises Aguirre, to an annual salary of \$275,600. This is over five times the \$54,000 salary of a starting teacher in the district.

This school year, the board also approved the promotions of four central district administrators from the title of chief administrator to assistant superintendent and raised each of their salaries from \$185,000 to \$225,000.

During contract negotiations between SEA and the district last year, teachers were given a concessions contract and told by the union leadership it was the best they could do given inflation. The contract only provided 3 percent raises in May and July 2022, as well as a six-month 4 percent bonus funded from ESSER monies. This is nowhere near enough to account for the skyrocketing cost of living in California and stands starkly contrasted to the immediate 21.6 percent raises central office administrators received earlier this year.

San Diego has one of the highest costs of living and the fourth largest homeless population in the United States. According to 2023 data from the Cost of Living Index, San Diego is 3 percent higher than the state average and 44 percent higher than the national average cost of living. San Diego housing is 123 percent more expensive on average nationally, while food prices and utilities are well over 10 percent above the national average.

Sweetwater teachers should place no confidence in the trade union bureaucracies, from the local SEA to the state California Teachers Association and their national parent unions, the American Federation of Teachers and National Education Association, all of whom have worked continuously to smother genuine rank-and-file opposition and funnel all opposition among educators back into the Democratic Party.

Last November, Congressional Democrats, including members of the Democratic Socialists of America, voted to shut down a potential strike by 120,000 railroad workers and ram through a despised contract as the strike threatened the US supply chain and Washington's drive to war against Russia.

California Governor Gavin Newsom's own policies align with those of President Biden and national Democratic legislators, who are pushing a record \$1 trillion military budget while demanding austerity, based on the lie that there is no money for social programs, health, and education. In March, Newsom wasted no time in begging Biden to bail out Silicon Valley Bank in the wake of its collapse, but he has not lifted a finger for education. In fact, his latest budget proposal includes a \$1.5 billion decrease in education spending.

The situation facing students, educators and families at SUHSD is no different than the fight by educators from Los Angeles to New York, and globally in the UK, France, Brazil and Sri Lanka who are demanding fully-funded public education. Major struggles are on the horizon everywhere, which requires the unity of educators with other workers around the globe.

The union bureaucracies and parties of the ruling elites have made clear that they will do nothing to defend public education or any of the social rights of the working class. Rank-and-file educators and school workers must unite independently and merge their struggle with other sections of workers through the building of networks of democratically controlled rank-and-file committees. We urge all educators in Sweetwater to fill out the form below to get involved in this struggle today.



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