

The Oakland teachers strike and the need for rank-and-file committees

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11 May 2023

Thursday marks one week since Oakland teachers went on strike. Teachers have shown determination on the picket lines, and there is mass support to defend public education from the attacks carried out by both Democrats and Republicans.

But a sharp warning must be made: In order to win real gains, workers must take the struggle out of the hands of the Oakland Education Association (OEA) union bureaucrats, who are trying to divert their anger into support for the very same politicians at the city, county, state and federal levels who have been slashing the education budgets year after year.

The Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) is preparing massive cuts to close a \$79 million deficit and has already approved initial layoffs among support staff. At a March 9 meeting, the school board brought school closures and mergers back on the table despite years of protests from school staff, students and families.

But rather than fight this assault on public education, OEA officials have sought to tie teachers' hands in the bargaining process by trying to keep the strike limited to "unfair labor practices" (ULP) and refusing to include any economic demands in the strike.

The union leadership is preparing the exact same betrayal they carried out in 2019. After a seven-day strike, OEA leaders suddenly claimed that the district did not have the money to meet teachers' demands and that they had to accept a \$22 million budget cut, raises below inflation, the closure of the ROOTS International Academy, and no solution to the gross lack of nurses and other support staff. The OEA called that contract a great "victory," but taking inflation into account real pay for teachers dropped by 12 percent.

The claim that there is "no money" for schools—either in California, home to the most billionaires in the

country, or in the United States—is a total lie. While the OUSD demands budget cuts, the Biden administration advocates unprecedented military spending. The most recent budget brought military spending to a record \$886 billion. The ruling class is redirecting the wealth produced by the working class away from basic social needs, such as education and health care, and towards war. This impacts the families of many Oakland students, some of whom fled the 2009 Obama-backed coup in Honduras or the US-funded Saudi war on Yemen.

A striking example of the collaboration between the OEA and the Democrats is the series of photo opportunities featuring right-wing Democratic politicians, including California Congressional Representatives Adam Schiff and Barbara Lee and State Assembly members Alex Lee and Liz Ortega.

Schiff, the former chair of the House Intelligence Committee, is an ardent advocate for war preparations against China. He supports the NATO-backed proxy war against Russia in Ukraine that he deceitfully framed as a "struggle of freedom against tyranny." In reality, the right-wing Ukrainian regime glorifies Nazi collaborators during World War II and imprisons left-wing and antiwar opponents.

He has also supported the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya and called for increased US intervention in Syria. Schiff's political campaigns have been generously financed by weapons manufacturers and military contractors. Firms funneling money to Schiff include Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, Raytheon, L3Harris and others. A photo op featuring such a warmonger is an affront to teachers and students.

Both the state and county superintendents of public education, Democrats Tony Thurmond and Alysse Castro, received endorsements from the OEA's

President Ismael Armendariz and have been repeatedly praised by union leaders during negotiations. Castro is explicitly demanding every gain teachers make to be balanced by budget cuts elsewhere, while Thurmond is a supporter of California Assembly Bill 1840, which ties funding to school closures.

The union is also attempting to divert teachers' attention from the devastating budget cuts by concentrating on so-called "Common Good" demands. These include the establishment of a new committee of community members to oversee OUSD's community schools, which provide resources to address students' non-academic needs, like food, health care or immigration services. Other components involve the demand for safe facilities free of lead and climate-controlled classrooms, important measures that are incompatible with the cuts demanded by the union-backed politicians.

One of these demands explicitly calls for schools with more than 40 percent black students to receive a larger portion of the budget, as well as additional staff. Billed as part of reparations for black students, it would enshrine in the teachers' contract a reactionary racial division in the schools. It would also divert badly needed resources from immigrant communities and other highly exploited sections of the city. Rather than fight for the resources every student needs, regardless of race or nationality, the union is whipping up racial divisions, forcing families of different backgrounds to fight each other for access to dwindling resources.

If there is to be a real fight, against both the district and the politicians carrying out the cuts, it must be carried out by the teachers themselves. Instead of begging right-wing politicians for a "seat at the table," as they eviscerate education funding, educators must fight to rally workers for a full defense of public education.

Across the state and entire country, districts are facing the impact of the continuing COVID-19 pandemic, exacerbated by the halt of already insufficient emergency funding. Teachers and staff in district after district have authorized or gone on strikes, including some of the largest in the country, such as the strike by Los Angeles Unified School District classified staff and teachers this March. Beyond educators, all workers are suffering under sharply rising inflation, skyrocketing housing prices and growing health care

expenses.

But the response of the Democratic Party is to suppress the growing movement of the working class. Last November, the Biden administration went to Congress to secure a strike ban and impose a contract on 120,000 railroaders. This dictatorial law was supported not only by a majority of Democrats, but three members of the Democratic Socialists of America in the House, including Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Meanwhile, 22,000 dock workers along the West Coast have been kept on the job without a contract for nearly a year in talks being closely coordinated with the White House.

Workers all over the world are rising up against declining living standards and attacks on democratic rights, from mass strikes in France against cuts to retirement to protests in Israel against the government's far-right attacks on democratic rights. The objective conditions exist for a powerful struggle of workers against social inequality uniting workers all over the world. But this requires the construction of new organizations and a new orientation.

Building rank-and-file committees at every school site and workplace, independent of both big business parties and their servants in the union bureaucracy, is an important first step in the defense of public education.

There is plenty of money to ensure that every student has small class sizes in modern facilities with air filtration, access to counselors and other support staff, and everything else necessary for a modern, scientific education. But it can only be won by mobilizing workers in a broader strike in defense of education.

No cuts! No closures!



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