

San Diego educators and staff rally after a year of working without a contract

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Are you a San Diego teacher? Tell us what your teaching conditions are like and what you're demanding in the next contract. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

This past Tuesday, several hundred teachers and school workers in the San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) protested outside the SDUSD district offices. The rally, called by San Diego Educators Association (SDEA) and the California School Employees Association (CSEA) Locals 724, 759 and 788, took place as teachers and school employees have been working under expired contracts since June 2022.

SDUSD is the largest school district in the city and second largest district in the state, with over 97,000 students and 13,559 employees, including 6,000 teachers. The district has seen decades of budget cuts, including the recent cuts of \$196 million between 2020 through 2022.

Families and students are being blamed for the continued cuts, as “decreasing enrollment” is the catch all justification to the attack on public education. The district reports that further decreases in enrollment, plus the looming cuts in federal and state funding, necessitate budget cuts of a further \$19 million for the 2023-2024 fiscal year. Last Friday, the district announced in an email to staff the abrupt closure of an online school, iHigh, for the secondary grades 6-12 starting the next school year.

The fight breaking out in the district is part of a larger struggle by educators, who are demanding a halt to public education cuts. These include struggles in Los Angeles, Detroit and Oakland, as well as among teachers in New Zealand and the United Kingdom.

The turnout at Tuesday's rally shows the willingness of teachers to fight against spiraling class sizes, high turnover, poorly maintained infrastructure and inadequate COVID-19 safety measures. The *La Jolla Light* newspaper reported in 2022 that the district faces over \$750 million just in repairs and maintenance to school buildings. Faced with the opposition among the rank and file to these untenable conditions and support for strike action, the SDEA has announced that if an agreement is not reached by the end of this month, it will declare an impasse with the district.

Despite the teachers' widespread desire to fight for significant improvements, the SDEA leadership is doing all it can to avert a strike, making clear it is pushing for an agreement to be reached by the end of May. The union is proposing 18 percent in raises over the next two years, which is hardly enough to keep up with skyrocketing inflation.

In the face of mass layoffs in 2017, the SDEA bureaucrats did

not lift a finger to wage a struggle against the layoffs, instead they stated that their job was to “make sure that everyone is being laid off properly.”

The 2017 layoffs and role of SDEA must be taken as a stark warning. It is imperative that teachers take the struggle against deteriorating conditions out of the hands of the SDEA and unite with teachers around San Diego County and across the country who are facing the same conditions. Teachers must raise their own demands and form rank-and-file committees independent of the union apparatus and Democrats and Republicans.

Teachers and school workers spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about their demands and the untenable conditions in the schools:

Nicole, a first year teacher, said, “There are fears that the private schools are taking money from the public ones, and we need to see in writing how much charters are going to be allowed to take. We are also fighting for prep time. I'm a special education teacher, and we can't function the way we are. We need more paraeducators or class aides. We don't have those resources.”

Michelle spoke of the inadequate support for students and teachers dealing with the social trauma and shocks caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. “Schools don't have psychologists, counselors. The district shares a pool of counselors. There aren't enough to put one at every school site.”

Addressing the district's lack of protocols and precautions to prevent COVID-19, she said, “Whatever measures were taken are not in place anymore. For example, teachers used to be paid if they had to take days off if they tested positive. Right now, if you test positive, you are required to stay home, but you aren't paid, which with inflation incentivizes a lack of reporting of positive cases.”

Darcy, also a teacher in the district, explained the lack of adequate resources. “We are all dealing with behavior issues, but those have bigger societal causes. We need a cap on class sizes, not averages. Right now, as long as the average is 24, we see classes in the 30s. It is even worse for the SPED teachers.” She also demanded all schools have full-time nurses and counselors.

Another teacher who preferred not to give her name said, “Budget decisions keep teachers strung along from year to year. It is not uncommon to be laid off several years in a row. I only now got lucky. The decision-making is so disconnected. The board makes the decisions that impact the classrooms, but they never see the conditions. We need more democracy, democracy over working conditions.”

The conditions for Special Education (SPED) students are particularly atrocious. **Madie**, a ninth grade teacher, indicated that some programs have placed non-SPED specialized teachers into Special Education programs, which speaks to the overextension of teachers to make up for decaying conditions. Reporters interviewed several SDUSD teachers who indicated that caseloads for SPED teachers are regularly over the official cap, at times by 50 percent.

Amanda, a speech pathologist, explained the effects of overextended caseloads on support providers. “When our caseloads are stacked, we have no prep time. Among my colleagues the burnout is real. There is no accountability. For speech pathologists, the cap is supposed to be 55 students per case manager, but I have seen caseloads that push 80.

“We are doing our best to keep our heads above water, but when the caseloads are how they are, the obligations and work just pile up. We are scrambling to get the bare minimum done. It is a disservice to the children. We are not given enough support. Nobody is thriving in this kind of environment. If we had smaller caseloads, we could do more for each student. But that means hiring more SPED teachers and support providers, which is really difficult to do in this kind of environment. The whole system needs fixing,” Amanda said.

When asked about funding, she said, “There should always be enough money for schools; it is a matter of priorities. They always seem to find enough money to give to the war machine.” Amanda continued, “It affects our culture, everything is tense. Gun issues and safety need to be taken seriously. We are also dealing with a lot of trauma from the pandemic.”

Joe, an elementary and middle school teacher, said, “We definitely need counselors at the elementary school level. I have students whose parents have medical issues, and my students come distressed. Our school is lucky to have permanent counselors that teachers can speak to, but that’s not the case at every other school.”

On the situation facing young people, he noted, “There isn’t an easy way or a simple transition for students to go straight to college. It’s tough for people to get a full education. There’s a barrier for people getting into college, and they take out big student loans. I’m still paying mine.”

As for teacher salaries, he noted, “I’ve been working as a teacher for seven years, and these seven years I’ve been saving up for a house but I’m not close to what I need. With inflation hitting I’ve had to change my diet. I used to eat chicken, but I’ve had to substitute that for pork because, well, it’s cheaper. My wife and I go shopping, and we always go to the clearance section. It’s what we can afford.”

When asked about the war in Ukraine and the massive funding it is receiving, Joe responded, “It’s disheartening to see that millions are spent for war and not on issues like education.” Speaking on the international struggle of educators and workers, he said, “I’m happy to see the [strike wave] in France. It has a motivational air to it, like a shining light. It serves as an inspiration for what we could do.”

Jason and Anthony work as Physical Plant Operation workers. They emphasized the severe short staffing in the district. “We

work about 250 schools, and we handle things like security and fire safety. It’s a tall order for us to be handling that. We need at least another 4- 6 people working with us. We’ve been spending Saturdays trying to make up the work. Yes, you get paid to work, but we have families. What we want is a livable wage and a competitive wage.

“There are people in other districts and outside of the school system making an extra \$12-15,000 a year. We’re asking for a bump in our steps (categories where each step represents a pay raise) and 30 percent. We’ve been without a contract for six years. I’ve been stuck in my step this whole time. The district is trying to give us just 9 percent. With inflation, it’s just a pay cut.”

Aaron, a 15-year teacher, said he is fighting for “COLA (cost-of-living adjustment) which right now would be 10 percent. But look around you, all these teachers here are trying to get by with 10 percent less of what they are owed. Keep in mind, 10 percent isn’t a raise [because of inflation], as the district likes to call it.

“What we are really worried about are the new teachers. Their starting salary isn’t at the cost of living. ... Our union has accountants that know what the district has in terms of finance. There’s an open book policy. And our accountants say there’s money there for these raises. The district says it’s for a rainy day; it’s for a rainy day fund. Well, the rainy days are here.

“All we would need is a simple strike to send a message. The last time our union had a strike was 1996. I was in 7th grade then, and it had a big impact on me. It made me want to be a teacher. I think things like strikes have a bigger impact than we imagine, it has a lingering effect.”

When asked about the war in Ukraine and the budget for military spending he responded, “Well, it’s a travesty. I mean international politics are a complicated thing, but there is such a level of waste. I mean, how much is the cost of an air force bomber? That would be enough to lift the wages of teachers. There’s too much money for wars. It’s just like [French President Emmanuel] Macron making these gambles. What’s happening to Ukraine is terrible, but our federal budget dedicating that much money to war is just crazy.”

Jose, a maintenance worker, said, “I’m in charge of the landscape, inside and the outside of the school. But what we need is more manpower. Six years ago the district reduced our workforce by 40 percent. How are we expected to keep the schools looking good under those conditions? I mean these people must be out of touch with reality to think we can maintain our schools at a level of professionalism with such a cut in manpower?

“It’s ridiculous. We’re left to struggle on a daily basis. We’ve been working without a contract since 2020, think of all the inflation that has happened since then, including recently. We haven’t had a raise. It’s getting hard to make ends meet. There are many people just leaving the profession to look for a better wage.”



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