

Poorly attended “mass” meeting of Oakland, California teachers precedes vote on sellout agreement

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On Thursday, the Oakland Education Association (OEA) held a “mass membership” meeting to review the tentative agreement (TA) which the OEA bureaucracy used to shut down a seven-day strike. Voting on the TA ended Monday afternoon, a week after the OEA shut down the strike in the dead of night and gave teachers only one day to resume regular classes.

Out of the nearly 3,000 union members, roughly 60 showed up, indicating widespread disgust and alienation felt by workers towards the apparatus. By comparison, the union’s “big bargaining” team, which the OEA presented as more “democratic” and “inclusive,” had 50 members. But all key decisions around the strike from its timing, demands, scope and, most significantly, when to call it off were made behind the backs of teachers.

The TA is largely identical to the Oakland Unified School District’s (OUSD) last offer on compensation before the strike but adds several “common good demands,” which serve as window dressing. These “common good” issues center around racial funding quotas for schools where significant proportions of the student body are African American, aimed at driving a wedge between the diverse population of teachers, student and parents, like Latino students including immigrants from Latin America who make up roughly half the district’s student body. The “common good” initiatives are to be implemented alongside school closures and the continuing degradation of school conditions as a whole, as the school district plans to carry out massive cuts to overall funding.

Kevin, a first year chemistry teacher and one of the few people at the meeting not directly involved in

union negotiations, explained, “I don’t know that anything in the TA is going to immediately improve the conditions for my students, at least. The original reason that most members went on strike was because of compensation. And like I said, we didn’t see the 23 percent raise that we wanted; the median raise is about 15 percent.”

Taking inflation into account, the last contract saw a 12 percent cut in Oakland teachers’ real wages. Poverty wages have driven a district staffing crisis, where annual teacher turnover is 20 percent. In real terms, the TA would bring teachers roughly to what they were paid in 2016.

The low turnout was also the product of deliberate efforts by the bureaucracy. At the end of an earlier strike in 2019, the OEA held a membership meeting with over 1,000 teachers in attendance, where the overwhelming majority spoke against the contract. The union was barely able to pass the deal by 57 percent to 43. The day after the TA was ratified, the school district passed over \$20 million in budget cuts with OEA approval.

This time, in order to minimize teacher participation, the OEA called the meeting with only 24 hours’ notice at a school in the Oakland Hills, right at the end of the work day.

The low turnout at the “mass” membership meeting also followed low turnout in union leadership elections which concluded during the strike. Less than a third of teachers voted, resulting in the current union president Ismael Armendariz winning, with votes from less than 20 percent of union members.

Teachers in Oakland are eager to wage a fight in defense of public education, as expressed in wildcat

strikes carried out earlier this year. But they are in conflict with the union apparatus, which has repeatedly conspired with Democratic politicians to push through budget cut after budget cut on the district.

The teachers find no outlet for their aspirations in any of the three pseudo-left factions that are jockeying for positions in the OEA. The Build Our Power Caucus (BOP) of Armendariz has held control since 2018 and is mostly associated with the Democratic Socialists of America. Armendariz is best known for campaigning on behalf of Democratic politicians who demand budget cuts and school closures in the district, including County Superintendent Alysse Castro and State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond.

They are opposed among the site representatives by the Equal Opportunity Now/By Any Means Necessary caucus (BAMN) and the more recent Rank & File Caucus (RFC). But their role has been to give technical criticisms of the leadership on when and how to call strikes, while covering up the direct political support OEA leaders give to budget cuts.

The OEA bureaucracy intentionally sought to hamstring this strike by calling it under an unfair labor practices (ULP) complaint, which precludes raising any economic demands. They also have maintained a guilty silence on the massive \$79 million budget cuts being planned by local Democrats which they themselves had endorsed.

Instead of tackling any of these issues, BAMN's analysis of the strike simply proposes continuing the strike, while leaving the issue of district budget cuts unchallenged. They blame the horrible conditions in schools exclusively on Trump and the Republicans, rather than the Democrats who are in power at the city, county, state and federal levels. For their part, the Rank-and-File Caucus does not even call for a "no" vote on the TA, accepting the economic blackmail arranged by the union to offer a bonus with ratification while not offering teachers strike pay.

In contrast to BAMN and RFC, the Oakland Educators Rank-and-File Committee calls unequivocally for a "No" vote as the starting point of a fight by teachers against not only the school district but union bureaucracy. Schools are under attack from both big business parties under a worked out plan including budget cuts, charter schools and vouchers, school

closures. This national assault cannot be fought district by district.

As the committee wrote in its statement urging a rejection of the contract:

The capitulation of the OEA leadership—which repeats at a higher stage of the global class struggle their betrayal of our 2019 strike—is not the product of the subjective spinelessness of the union leaders. Rather, it is an expression of their integration with the Democratic Party, which controls the entire political system in Oakland and California. ... While Democrats and Republicans across the country claim there is no money for education, the Biden administration is demanding a \$1 trillion military budget to push for war with Russia and China.

The statement concluded:

In calling for a "No" vote on the TA, the Oakland Educators Rank-and-File Committee aims to rally workers across the region in the fight to defend public education. ... To win the conditions teachers and students have a right to, we must reject austerity budgets, break out of the union-imposed straitjacket of separating us district by district, and build towards a statewide and nationwide fight in defense of public education.



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