

Oakland, California teachers union pushes through sellout contract

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The Oakland Education Association (OEA) announced Monday evening that a tentative agreement (TA) used to call off a seven-day teachers strike was ratified by the membership. The union had called off the strike without a vote last week, with only nine days left in the school year as a method of pressuring teachers to accept the sellout contract.

According to OEA's email to teachers, 72% of union members participated in the vote with 90% of those voting in favor, or 65% of the total membership. This is a modest drop from the strike authorization vote, where 87% voted in favor with 88% participating, or 77% of members.

These figures, assuming they were not doctored by the bureaucracy, must be taken with a grain of salt, given significant alienation and hostility felt by teachers towards the bureaucracy. This was expressed in a "mass membership" contract meeting held last week which was attended by only a handful of people. If the figures are accurate, they are less a sign of support for the contract than a vote of no confidence in the union to conduct a struggle.

The TA is largely identical to the Oakland Unified School District's (OUSD) last offer on compensation before the strike, which brings pay in real terms back to what teachers were earning in 2016. One of the few differences is that it adds several "common good demands," to serve as window dressing. These issues include funding quotas based on the racial categorization of schools, earmarking funding where significant proportions of the student body are African American. This is aimed at driving a wedge between the diverse population of teachers, student and parents, including Latino students, including immigrants from Latin America, who make up roughly half the district's student body.

Other "common good" demands during contract talks had included points on school closures and creating safe classrooms without mold or vermin, but each and every one of those was dropped by the union in favor of non-binding consultative committees. For example, the school closure agreement specifically includes "This agreement in no way abrogates the ability or authority of OUSD to close or merge schools." Each of the common good agreements includes an unambiguous final clause reading "This agreement will expire in full without precedent on June 29, 2025 and, as of that day, shall cease to have any force or effect."

The "Common good" demands are being used by teacher unions across the country in order to posture as progressive while ramming through the budget cuts demanded by politicians. The president of United Teachers Los Angeles, Cecily Myart-Cruz, who rammed through a contract in Los Angeles this semester, published an article in *The Nation* that praising OEA while blatantly lying about the content of the tentative agreement.

Myart-Cruz claimed that the district had "settled on a plan to ensure that schools are free from gun violence, asbestos, lead, and mice infestations," instead of creating a committee to discuss the issue. In Oakland these consultative committees are to be implemented alongside school closures and the continuing degradation of school conditions as a whole. OUSD already approved layoffs of support staff in March.

The contract sets the stage for massive cuts in the district to fill a \$79 million budget deficit next year. These cuts are being implemented at the local and state level by the very politicians that the union has endorsed. OEA president Ismael Armendariz campaigned for State superintendent Tony Thurmond, who has demanded school closures and budget cuts

from OUSD for years. Armendariz also campaigned for county superintendent Alysse Castro who has insisted throughout negotiations that gains made by teachers must be offset by cuts elsewhere.

As in 2019, when the OEA rammed through the last contract after shutting down a strike, the union bureaucracy is hailing the strike as a great victory. The 2019 contract saw teachers' real wages collapse by 12% and was immediately followed by school closures and layoffs by OUSD which the OEA refused to fight. The 2019 contract was only passed by a thin margin, 57% to 43%, after a stormy membership meeting where most of the speakers denounced the deal.

Seeking to avoid a repeat of 2019 when militant teachers nearly overrode the union's effort to shut down the strike, this time the OEA violated any pretense of democracy and shut down the strike without a vote of the teachers. As usual, the teachers union did not offer members strike pay during the stoppage, and dangled a \$5,000 signing bonus in front of teachers to pressure them into accepting the "no strike" pledge of the contract in advance of school closures and budget cuts.

Many teachers felt trapped by the union's maneuvers and saw no way to fight both the union and district in the last few days of the school year.

The distance between the union bureaucrats and this majority of teachers who authorized the strike, in which key demands included an immediate 23% raise as well as concrete and enforceable measures for classroom air quality and conditions, was sharply demonstrated by the union leadership elections held during the strike as well as the union meeting to promote the TA at the start of voting.

Although the union elections ended during the strike, as teachers across the district demonstrated their intense desire to fight for better conditions, fewer than one in three voted in the elections. In all, Armendariz won his seat as president with the votes of fewer than 20% of union members. The "mass meeting" called last week to sell the TA attracted only 60 teachers. With a "big bargaining" team of roughly 50 members, this means that almost no teacher who wasn't directly involved in negotiations even bothered to listen to the union's pitch.

The Oakland Educators Rank-and-File Committee was founded in 2019 to fight to take the strike out of

the union bureaucracies hands and push for a unified political struggle of teachers across the state and country in defense of public education. Schools are under attack from both big business parties under a worked out plan including budget cuts, school closures, charter schools and vouchers. 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.

Teachers across the country are pushing back against the relentless assault on schools, including Michigan educators seeking to protect students after a six year old died from a "mystery illness," and San Diego teachers who have been without a contract for over a year. Only a unified struggle of school workers that relies on mobilizing the working class can enforce the social right of teachers and students to safe, quality schools against the desire of both big business parties.



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