

Voting begins on tentative agreement between SDEA union and San Diego Unified

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Voting begins today on a Tentative agreement announced between the San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) and the San Diego Educators Association (SDEA), which represents some 6,000 educators in the district.

SDUSD is the largest school district in the city and second largest district in the state, with over 97,000 students, and 13,000 educators and staff. The SDEA has kept teachers on the job working under expired contracts since June 2022.

The announcement of the tentative agreement came as opposition has swelled against unbearable working conditions, expressing itself in rolling pickets and a recent rally that drew many hundreds of educators who made powerful pleas for more support staffing as well as wage increases that keep up with costs of living. The deal was announced on Friday just before the Memorial Day weekend and teachers will vote June 1-8.

Educators must overwhelmingly reject this contract as it will ensure the continued impoverishment of teachers and erosion of conditions. Teachers must place no faith in the SDEA, which has advanced this rotten agreement, and take the struggle into their own hands by building rank-and-file committees, whose first order of business must be organizing a decisive “no” vote.

Despite the SDEA claiming the deal is yet another “historic win,” what is clear is that the agreement does not meet the demands of the teachers and provides no guaranteed staffing levels for counselors, paraeducators or nurses, and includes wage increases that barely meet inflation.

The desire by San Diego teachers to fight is part of a larger struggle by educators to halt the decades-long assault on public education, including struggles in Los Angeles, Detroit, Oakland as well as New Zealand and Canada. In every instance, workers face not only funding cuts from their respective school boards, but also the trade unions who, despite their posturing, work hand in glove with the Democratic Party that runs California and has overseen the defunding of education and attacks on teachers. The TA agreed to by SDEA is no exception. Be it recalled that the SDEA facilitated the mass layoffs of 1,500 educators in 2017.

The old principle of “No contract No work” has not stopped the SDEA from keeping educators on the job without a raise or contract since June 2022.

The tentative agreement marks a continuation of the attacks on educators. The “raises” in the three-year contract only apply to two years however. There is a 10 percent retroactive increase for the July 2022- June 2023 school year, 5 percent for the 2023-2024 school year, and no guarantees of any raise whatsoever in the 2024-2025 year in what is being referred to as a “Wage Reopener.” According to an

SDEA press release: “2024-2025: A wage reopener, meaning we go back to bargaining, to make further improvements in wages.”

SDEA claims this is the “largest pay increase in the county (possibly the state)” but in actuality it is hardly a raise, considering rising inflation. But, as one 15-year teacher noted, “Keep in mind, 10 percent isn’t a raise [because of inflation], as the district likes to call it.”

The US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) in its April Consumer Price Index (CPI) report showed that over the last 12 months consumer prices increased by 5 percent, and had reached a 9 percent peak last June in 2022. This speaks to the inadequacy of a 15 percent increase over two years which will barely keep pace with inflation in one of the most expensive areas in the country.

Further, there are no guarantees in the TA on the central issue of staffing. As one educator noted, “Schools don’t have psychologists, counselors. The district shares a pool of counselors. There aren’t enough to put one at every school site.”

According to the *San Diego Union Tribune*, San Diego Unified schools have a ratio of 424 students to one counselor. Despite COVID-19 relief funds, few counselors or nursing staff have been added. The *Tribune* noted “Fewer than half of schools added one or two days of a counselor a week. At 43 schools, counselor staffing remains unchanged from pre-pandemic levels, and at 13 schools, counselor staffing dropped below pre-pandemic levels. There are 76 schools, all elementary, that lack a full-time counselor ... At 33 of the district’s 108 elementary schools, a counselor is there two days a week.” The TA will do nothing to solve this problem as the American School Counselor Association recommends a ratio of 250 students to one counselor.

Not only are there no mandated provisions for hiring, but the work year is extended for nurses, with Article 8 listing the basic contract year for School Nurses increasing from 184 to 186 workdays. Instead, all that is included are promises to produce monthly reports. “On a monthly basis, the District shall provide reports to the Board of Education, at an open public meeting, on the progress towards hiring the necessary preparation time staff need to meet the requirements of this section.”

On the question of reducing class sizes, a major demand among rank-and-file teachers, the TA maintains class “averages” that in fact allow schools to push the average’s upper limits. Due to special grant money through LCFF funds, only the TK-3 grade’s class caps were reduced from 35 to 29 students. Grades 4-6 will remain at an average of 32 and secondary sites have an average of 36 students. As one teacher at the recent SDEA rally said, addressing the opposition to the deceptive use of class averages, “Right now, as long as the average is

24, we see classes in the 30s. It is even worse for the SPED teachers.”

Article 9, dealing with the provisions related to Health & Welfare Benefits is particularly misleading. It claims to extend coverage through the end of August or September “unless the District notifies the unit member of its predetermined intent to not reemploy the unit member in the following school year.” This means in fact that temporary educators, on a yearlong contract with no guarantees of returning, may not have access to the extended coverage.

The extension of health care throughout the summer should be accessible for all without exception. It is in fact the continued decline in conditions, unreliability of health care, pink slips, abuse and poor wages which are among the central reasons that educators continue to leave the profession.

The SDEA claims to have secured the demand for preparatory time for elementary educators. However, upon closer inspection, educators are only guaranteed that the starting allotment for “elementary school classroom teacher shall be a minimum of forty-five (45) minutes per week for grades TK-3 and sixty (60) minutes per week for grades 4-5.” The contract language goes on to explain that additional time (to a minimum of 180 minutes every two weeks for grades TK5 and sixth) shall be “gradually” increased and has no mandated starting date and will be dependent on the amount of Title I funding a school receives. It further notes, “the sequence in which the additional preparation time is increased will be determined by the Title I ranking of schools.” This means that the poorer performing schools will have to wait the longest for preparatory time, pushing them even further behind.

The TA states that MERV-13 filters will be installed in every classroom and workspace with a compatible HVAC system. However, again, there are no guarantees that this will be implemented by any set time. As for classrooms that do not have a compatible HVAC system, the contract only states they “should deploy air purifiers as needed.”

The very fact that these provisions were included speaks to the desires of the educators to teach in COVID- and virus-free classrooms, and a wider desire for mitigations. However, the tentative agreement allows for older classrooms with crumbling infrastructure and without working HVAC systems, to remain as they are, with no mandate to bring them up to standard.

Meanwhile, COVID and other respiratory viruses, which are airborne, like influenza, continue to run rampant through schools. Well over 1,000 people continue to die weekly of COVID-19 in the US alone, according to Our World in Data, with the week ending March 18 noting 1,943 deaths. While the Biden administration continues the Trump administration’s practice of downplaying the pandemic, the stark reality is that children and adults continue to get repeat infections and millions are suffering from long COVID. Both the SDEA and the district played a key role in pushing educators into classrooms and enforcing the policies which have continued to place profits before lives.

The TA was reached under conditions of major looming budget cuts to public education and other social spending as a result of the bipartisan debt ceiling agreement. This is on top of the \$4 billion cut in state funds for public K-12 and community colleges in California proposed by Governor Gavin Newsom. Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds will also dry up next year, meaning SDUSD will have to find other funding sources or cut positions and programs in the district.

SDUSD has imposed decades of budget cuts, including the recent cuts of \$196 million between 2020 through 2022. Recently, the district

has blamed “decreasing enrollment” as the justification for the attack on public education. Reporting further decreases in enrollment, plus the looming cuts in federal and state funding, the district has claimed the need for budget cuts of at least \$19 million for the 2023-2024 fiscal year. Last Friday, the district announced in an email to staff the abrupt closure of the district’s online school for the secondary grades 6-12 starting next school year.

Added to the TA are two entirely new articles, 37 and 38, both statements of intent, which put forward “common good” demands. This includes the Community Schools Initiative which allocates provisions for staffing positions at the site and district level to plan and organize the establishment of a network of community schools in the district and an intent to design “racially just schools” through which the district and community schools leadership would carry out “curriculum audits” based on unspecified criteria. The TA also includes a statement of intent to increase after-school opportunities for schools.

These agreements are the result of the National Education Association-backed initiative of “Bargaining for the Common Good” which are being used by teacher unions across the country in order to use social justice rhetoric as a “progressive” cover while ramming through the budget cuts demanded by big business politicians.

The promotion of racial politics is a specialty of the Democratic Party, which has been at the forefront of attacks on public education, including increased privatization. This has been particularly true in the state of California. Instead of fighting for the resources every student needs, regardless of race, the union and districts are whipping up racial divisions, pitting schools against each other in a fight for dwindling resources.

Every year educators are told there are no funds for public education, yet trillions of dollars are funneled to the US and NATO war drive against Russia in Ukraine. Workers must reject this. Funds exist aplenty. California is the richest state, in the wealthiest country in the world. It is a question of reorganizing priorities. Instead of massive funding for war, police, prisons and multi-billion-dollar tax breaks for the wealthy, funds must be redirected to meet the needs of the working class and youth, including the necessary billions toward public education.

Educators must overwhelmingly reject this contract, as it will do nothing to significantly transform schools. No confidence can be placed in the SDEA leadership that negotiated this worthless agreement. It is up to rank-and-file teachers to take the initiative by building committees independent of the union apparatus. A massive “no” vote is only the first step. Teachers must prepare for a strike and to mobilize broader sections of the working class to win their demands, including above inflation pay raises, lower class sizes and full staffing. Fill out the form below to learn more about rank-and-file committees that organize teachers, staff, parents and students independently of the unions and both big business parties to fight for the social right to public education.



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