

Vote “No” on the tentative agreement! Build rank-and-file committees!

San Diego Sweetwater educators begin contract vote, as union bureaucrats use scare tactics against opposition

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Voting begins Tuesday and Wednesday for more than 1,500 teachers, librarians, nurses and speech pathologists at Sweetwater Union High School District (SUHSD) in San Diego, California, on a new tentative agreement between the district and the Sweetwater Education Association (SEA). The TA is a one-year reopener that includes wages, healthcare, class sizes, special education and language on alternative education.

SUHSD is the largest secondary school district in California, with more than 1,500 teachers, 36,000 students and 10,000 adult learners in southwestern San Diego County, along the US-Mexico border.

The demands of teachers and school staff include higher wages to keep pace with inflation, increased healthcare benefits and lower class sizes. Overworked special education (SPED) teachers are also demanding increased time to complete case management and for the hiring of more SPED teachers. Career Technical Education (CTE) teachers have also demanded to be placed on the same salary schedule as teachers.

Sweetwater is one of many districts across the country and around the world where teachers are fighting for better working conditions. This also includes an over three-week strike by educators in Portland, Oregon and a strike by public school staff in Southern Australia. This, in turn, is part of a growing upsurge in the class struggle internationally.

The tentative agreement falls far below workers’ demands. The contract would include a 9 percent pay increase retroactive to July 1. Special Education (SPED) teachers would get a \$4,000 stipend to be paid in two installments, but no additional time in their duty day to complete tasks. Career Technical Education (CTE) teachers would also be

placed on salary. But the TA provides no guaranteed staffing support and essentially accepts that SPED teachers will be forced to continue with the excessive workload outside work hours.

The union leadership is hailing the 9 percent raise as “historic,” claiming the union “settled at the right time and has the best one-year deal in the county. Since the year 2000, there is no other agreement in which SEA gained 9 percent for a single year...”

But the increase hardly makes up for years of paltry wage increases that have not kept up with inflation, which only recently peaked at 9 percent and remains at all-time highs. For the 2022-2023 school year, teachers received a 3 percent increase effective May 1, 2022 and another 3 percent effective July 1, 2022. Using COVID-19 relief funds, the district and union also agreed to small bonuses in 2022 and 2023.

A recent report published by *U.S. News & World Report* ranked San Diego as #1 among the “Most Expensive Places to Live.” According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, prices in the San Diego area rose 4.7 percent in the past year, and rent increased by 8.8 percent in September. Meanwhile, electricity costs have skyrocketed by 16.2 percent.

Strong opposition exists among educators to the agreement. One educator told the WSWs, “This 9 percent demonstrates how quickly the union folded. They’re citing 1 percent for COLA adjustment for next year. The cost for a house in San Diego is nearly a million dollars. Teaching is going from a career to a gig job.”

Another teacher said, “I’m lower on the salary schedule, and with a 9 percent raise, I’m still barely making ends meet. This year top administrators in the district got huge salary increases, and peanuts for us?!”

“We have been told by our union leadership that we should accept the 9 percent because the district just does not have the money to pay teachers higher raises, that any negotiation for, say, a 20 percent raise would result in definite cuts in the immediate future. But there is such a lack of transparency on where the money even goes here. What about the \$179 million budget that the district recently announced it has? It also raises huge question marks for me as to how exactly the COVID funds have been spent, or even Title 1 funds.”

The SEA bureaucracy has said nothing about the ongoing budget crisis in the district, which imposed \$30 million in budget cuts in 2020. The cuts led to the elimination of bus routes, the gutting of learning centers, layoffs of teachers and support staff and the closure of adult schools.

Never once did the SEA lead any significant struggle to refuse the imposition of these cuts, despite the fact that the 2020 budget deficit included an estimated \$68 million in supposedly “mismanaged” funds, which have yet to be located.

Since 2020, the cuts have continued, including the closure of the remaining three learning centers. Hundreds of teachers and staff, who were laid off in 2020, faced years of temporary assignments, driving down their wages and contributing to the ongoing teacher shortage by pressuring them to leave the district entirely. Only in the current school year have the remaining teachers on the reemployment list been reassigned.

Moreover, the “9 percent raise” does not account for massive employee healthcare contributions. The Preferred Provider Organization (PPO) insurance plan offered under the contract costs educators over \$3,600 per month for a family plan in which a family is defined as three or more persons (spouse and dependent, or two dependents, etc). The district contribution for this “employer-sponsored” health insurance is less than half what the employee ends up paying for family health insurance.

The released contract language indicates that the amount that the district will pay per employee healthcare benefits is a fraction of what the employee pays, at \$1,427.50 per month. The union is attempting to portray a slight increase in district “contributions” to health insurance payments as a major victory.

At the same time, the district’s central office administration gave themselves huge pay increases of an immediate 21 percent. Last May, the board approved a 6 percent raise and three-year extension of the contract for the current superintendent, Moises Aguirre, to an annual salary of \$275,600. This is over five times the \$54,000 salary of a starting teacher in the district. During the 2022-2023 school year, the school board also approved the promotions of four

central district administrators, increasing each of their salaries from \$185,000 to \$225,000.

In an attempt to bully educators into voting “yes,” the SEA is threatening workers with an even worse deal if they reject it. In a statement on its website, the union says, “If the TA is not ratified, SEA does NOT start bargaining where we left off at 9%. We start all over and with the projected COLA public, the district has the leverage. Not ratifying the TA, could result in a deal that is not as favorable to SEA. Contrary to rumor, voting down a TA and getting a better deal is RARE AND DEFINITELY NOT COMMONPLACE.”

Educators must not be intimidated by this threat. If they organize a real struggle, unencumbered by the treacherous union bureaucracy, they can win their demands. The first order of business for teachers must be to reject the tentative agreement by the widest possible margin. This must be connected to the building of new organizations, rank-and-file committees, to prepare educators to take on both the district and the corrupt apparatus.

District workers must link their fight to the broader movement unfolding in the working class around the world. In particular, Sweetwater educators must link up with striking actors who are building a powerful “Vote No” movement against a sellout contract being foisted on them by the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA), which meets none of their demands after a months-long strike.

The movement of educators must also link up with the growing antiwar movement, particularly among young people, against the Israeli genocide in Gaza. District students at Bonita Vista High are being targeted for speaking out against the atrocities being committed against the Palestinian people in their school newspaper.

Adding insult to injury, educators at a middle school in the district informed the *World Socialist Web Site* that last week just before the holiday break, a military Black Hawk helicopter landed on the playground field during lunch for a school rally, some of the very aircraft used by Israel Defense Forces against the Palestinian people.

Educators must reject the lie parroted by both the district and the SEA bureaucracy that there is “no money” for higher wages. Instead of raises for all workers and major funding for public education, schools have faced continued austerity while trillions have been funneled into war.



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