

Educators stage sick-out to protest staff cuts in East Orange, New Jersey

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18 October 2024

On Thursday and Friday hundreds of educators in the city of East Orange, New Jersey staged a sickout after the school board decided to cut 93 jobs from the staff of approximately 640 teachers and 300 teaching assistants and other instruction-related workers in their district. Schools were caught unaware by the job action and had to schedule only a half-day of classes for students both days.

Administrators claim the cuts—including substitute teachers, academic coaches, Spanish teachers, and social workers—are necessary because of a nearly \$25 million budget deficit that will make the district unable to meet payrolls by May. The layoffs are scheduled to take effect in December.

The educators' union, the East Orange Education Association (EOEA), while it claims to oppose the layoffs, has been having teachers work without a contract. In a statement on Instagram, the EOEA warned educators against taking action in defense of jobs, declaring, "All actions that are planned that haven't been sanctioned by the EOEA Action Committee chair and the president of the EOEA must cease and desist..."

"Because a strike is illegal, an injunction can be sought by the mayor of East Orange. That injunction could result in arrests of all individuals involved. Those arrests could result in tenure charges. Tenure charges could result in a loss of your certifications and pensions. Is it worth it?"

The city's mayor, Democrat Ted Green, told the media: "There's gonna be some tough times. And we're just asking everyone to embrace it."

East Orange is a city with population of about 70,000. It is a suburb of Newark, New Jersey's largest city, which is 11 miles (18 km) west of New York City. The school district has about 9,000 students.

The layoffs have been the subject of several hearings before the school board in recent days. On Wednesday, East Orange School District Superintendent Christopher Irving told a packed crowd that the budget shortfall has been developing for years, because of a reduction in state aid, rising costs and a lack of reserve funds. Educators protested outside before the meeting, noting that East Orange schools were already understaffed. This did little to placate the anger of the parents and teachers in attendance, who spoke vigorously against the layoffs.

One parent told the meeting, "My son is currently in the first grade, and he currently does not have a teacher. He's working off a substitute teacher, he gets split up once a week. The child is not learning anything."

On Thursday, another meeting was held that was smaller but equally impassioned. Administrators were clearly cowed by the anger, and allowed parents and educators to speak beyond the allotted five minute limit.

A new teacher who was hired in July and fired this week told the superintendent, "You directly affected my life. I was a teacher but was ripped yesterday. You and others on the board have said there was a hiring freeze. How do you explain there was a hiring freeze? You said in an interview that no one was directly affected. I was."

Tyesha Portion, a parent, said, "I had to console my two daughters, ages eleven and nine, because of what you did. My children were crying because there was no teacher, because of your firings. It is my understanding that there was more money in the state funding that the state was going to give you but you refused because you did not want to let them see your books. Why? It is also my understanding that the board knows about money they were keeping from the last two years. I

want to know why they are keeping information from the parents.

“I work two shifts Tuesday, and Wednesday. I slept thirty minutes in twenty-four hours. My daughter just got a permanent teacher and now what? She will be struggling. Last year she had to stay home two months and I had to do home schooling. How will we be able to transport the children? I don’t have that kind of time. You say you have to do all these things. So do we!”

One of the parents who had waited in the long line to speak asked emphatically, “How can you guarantee that IEP [Instructional Education Plan for special needs] students will be given what they need?”

One parent raised the problem that the school buses that had been provided before the COVID pandemic are not transporting students anymore. “And my child’s first grade teacher needed donations for things so basic as paper towels and printing paper.”

“What are you doing to address children’s social-emotional needs?” asked another parent. “You are getting rid of social workers. And it is unacceptable that a child should be forced to be with 103 students of one grade level, as was done today. And how can teachers teach if they are drained?”

A woman stood on line to speak holding a large green sign that said, “superintendent, the focus should be our children. If we have no teachers, then our children have no future.” When it came her turn to speak, she said, “Children are told to be doctors and engineers. But when the school year began, they never had a chance. This is not a business; this is our children.”

After the meeting the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to one mother who is also a hospital nurse: “I have four children,” she said, “One here in the high school, one at STEM Academy, one at the Jackson Street school, and one at Zadie’s School. Zadie’s is the only functioning school in East Orange. East Orange High School did not have a math teacher.

“They are not open about what is going on. They are doing a cover up. They knew there was a problem under the previous superintendent, but they just let him leave. The Board of Education, the Mayor, they were privy to this information.

“Children, those in special ed, are not able to have the needed one-to-one instruction. The person teaching the children is being laid off. But there has been mismanagement over the years by the Board of

Education. As a result, the state has refused to fund this school district. It looks like there is money for everything but the school districts. Why are we not funded? It does not make sense. There is negligence here, but it is a statewide issue. This city only gets a \$200,000 budget from the state this year.

“There is a shortage of teachers. I am a nurse, and we are also always short on staff. The Fire Department stations are condemned because of asbestos and had to move into trailers. In the basement of the Health Department, the nurses are sitting in flood water. Schools are closed today because of the Board, the City Council and the mayor. It is all out of control. The teachers have not had a contract in three years.”

Asked if she expected some improvement after the presidential elections, she responded, “I come from a somewhat conservative view, but I don’t see any solutions from either party. We need an independent party. There is not one that speaks to the people.”

A co-president of the Parent-Teacher Organization, Ivorine Nelson, told the WSWS, “How long does it take to fix a budget? This is killing all the teachers, students and parents. East Orange Mayor Ted Green came to the school today and left. He doesn’t know what he is doing. This is making education like a business when it should be about the children. The money is not coming for the schools. We pay for war, and we see people starving.”



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