

# “Obey now. Grieve later”: Teachers unions suppress resistance to fascism

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As protests against Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids, the federal murder of Renée Good and Alex Pretti, and ongoing ICE brutality in communities continue to grow, schools are becoming central in the struggle against the Trump administration’s brutal immigration policies.

On Friday, students from across the country walked out of their schools in solidarity with the tens of thousands of workers and community members in Minneapolis. This was the second demonstration in two weeks against the federal occupation of the city.

The most significant aspect of the demonstrations has been the growing call for a general strike against the Trump administration. There is a growing recognition that Trump’s strategy for dictatorship cannot be defeated except through mass action from below, using the methods of class struggle.

This has terrified the bureaucracy of the trade unions, whose bloated salaries depend on their delivery of labor peace to management and corporate politicians. Union officials around the country, while occasionally mouthing support for strike action in general, have refused to call any action.

As students walked out in opposition to fascistic attacks that threatened their communities, friends and families, teachers were ordered to do the opposite: remain in their classrooms, obey administrative directives and suppress any collective response, under the guise of “student safety.”

Union locals issued directives to teachers warning against participation in protests, reminding them of school districts’ policies on staff conduct, and instructing educators to enforce attendance and disciplinary rules against student protesters. These interventions were intended to block the participation of educators in actions framed as part of a national

general strike, which threatened to draw teachers into a mass movement independent from the union apparatus.

In Spokane, Washington, the Spokane Education Association (SEA) issued guidance to teachers ahead of a January 20 *National Walkout for Our Freedom* student protest that focused on supervision and compliance. The memo instructed educators to remain at their assigned posts during the school day and emphasized that teachers must not lead, organize or encourage student walkouts. If students chose to participate, teachers were directed to enforce district disciplinary rules, including marking students absent for participating in the action.

In Sweetwater, California, the union bureaucracy was more explicit. Guidance issued by the Sweetwater Education Association (SEA) ahead of the January 30 actions directly addressed what was being billed as a general strike. In a memo titled “*January 30 Guidance on Student Supervision and Leave*,” the union warned that withholding labor as part of the planned general strike constituted “unprotected activity” under California’s Educational Employment Relations Act.

Teachers were cautioned that participation could result in disciplinary action, including loss of pay or reprimand, and were warned that sick leave or personal necessity days could not be used for protest activity. The memo further warned that teachers who appeared at protests while on leave could be investigated for “leave fraud,” explicitly citing social media posts or news coverage as potential evidence.

Having prohibited the use of leave for protest, defined political activity as potential fraud and normalized surveillance of teachers’ public presence, the memo summarized its guidance in a blunt directive: “Obey now. Grieve later.”

In Los Angeles, the United Teachers Los Angeles

(UTLA) pursued the same objective through diversion rather than discipline. As calls circulated nationally for a general strike, UTLA redirected opposition into a symbolic “No Spending Day,” urging teachers to refrain from consumer purchases while remaining on the job. Invoking “student safety,” the union ruled out walkouts or work stoppages to ensure that their members stayed on the job.

The Chicago Teachers Union told its members to engage in similar protests after the school day. It is also scrubbing all statements by teachers supporting a general strike from its Facebook page.

The unions’ stance of containment reflects a long-standing political orientation articulated most openly by American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten, a longtime member of the Democratic National Committee.

In its review of Weingarten’s *“Why Fascists Fear Teachers: Public Education and the Future of Democracy,”* the *World Socialist Web Site* noted that she aims to disarm educators and workers, redefining “resistance” as “keep teaching” while voting for Democrats in the November midterms—which Trump is determined to hold under conditions of fear and repression, if they take place at all.

Action that escapes the narrow legal and electoral channels imposed on it by the bureaucracy and the corporate political establishment is treated as a threat to be neutralized. This suppression is carried out through the unions’ appeals to legalism, framed as professionalism, procedure and contractual obligation. Teachers are instructed to comply with administrative authority in the moment and defer any objections to grievance processes afterward.

Given the grievances are to be handled by the same officials passing on district threats against teachers, it is obvious these “grievances” will go nowhere. It amounts to an injunction in all but name, isolating educators from coordinated action with students and broader sections of the working class.

The escalation of immigration raids, police violence and the erosion of democratic rights is rooted in the deepening crisis of American capitalism. As U.S. global dominance declines and the economic foundations of its hegemony weaken, the defense of the oligarchy’s wealth requires the state to intensify repression and brutality at home in order to pursue its

imperialist aims.

The power of the working class must be brought to bear against oligarchy and inequality. But this requires new organizations which are accountable to workers, not the political establishment, and a strategy based on the mobilization of the working class, not its suppression.

Democratic rank-and-file committees are required to organize real protections for student and educator safety, based on collective action and solidarity with broader sections of the working class.

Rank-and-file committees must be established in every school, district and community, linking educators with students, parents and other workers. Networked across industries, these committees provide the means to secure genuine safety, oppose state repression and act collectively in the independent interests of the working class.



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