

Teachers, supporters speak out from San Francisco picket lines

Kathleen Martin
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Schools for 50,000 students in the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) remain closed Thursday as the strike by more than 6,400 teachers and support staff enters its fourth day. Educators are demanding higher wages, fully funded family healthcare and increased support for special education in the first teachers strike since 1979.

During a Wednesday press conference, Superintendent Maria Su claimed the district's offer was "generous," but insisted the school system was facing a fiscal crisis and any increase in spending would necessitate a cut somewhere else, according to the *San Francisco Chronicle*. "That's the reality of where we are. We do not have a lot of money," she said, adding the state still has control over district spending. "We need to be responsible with the deals."

District officials claim they face a \$100 million budget deficit after slashing 500 positions last year. If the Democrats who control San Francisco, the governor's office and the state legislature are demanding continued austerity it is due to a manufactured crisis of their own making. California is the home to Silicon Valley and 214 billionaires, the largest number of any state in the US.

School funding has long been undermined by decades of bipartisan corporate tax cuts and expansion of for-profit charter schools. This is being worsened by Trump's federal spending cuts and existential threat to public education.

The United Educators of San Francisco (UESF), closely tied to the Democratic Party, has limited its demands to a paltry and inadequate 9 percent raise over two years for teachers and 14 percent for paraprofessionals. While the union is calling for "fully funded" healthcare, the district has proposed covering only 75 percent. Teachers report paying as much as \$2,000 a month in co-pays for family coverage.

The strike is part of a growing wave of struggles across California, including the strike by 35,000 Kaiser Permanente healthcare workers. Last week, 35,000 members of United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) voted to authorize strike action, while teachers in San Diego have called a one-day strike for February 26. At least 18 other districts across California remain without contracts, as school officials continue to stonewall negotiations, primarily over wages.

Despite adopting the entirely hypocritical slogan "We Can't Wait," the California Teachers Association—affiliated with both the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association—has actively sabotaged coordinated action across the state. Even now, with an overwhelming strike authorization in Los

Angeles, United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) refuses to set a strike date.

This underscores the need for San Francisco educators to build a rank-and-file committee, independent of the UESF apparatus, to oppose any sellout of their struggle and expand the strike through the state.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to striking teachers and their supporters about the issues in the struggle.

Connor, a teacher for 23 years, said: "We're striking for better working conditions for special ed teachers and students. We're underfunded, so that's probably number one. Number two is wages. The district's offered us 2 percent, which isn't even cost of living."

"Third is healthcare," he said. He explained the prohibitive cost burden of healthcare falls on teachers with dependents, which pits them against those without dependents. "If you're a single person with no kids, your healthcare is about \$150 a month. If you have a dependent it goes up to about \$1,500-\$2,000. It's crazy."

"It's untenable for teachers with kids. It's the oldest play in the playbook, right? Having workers fight each other rather than coming together, which is what you see today at this strike."

He referenced the strike authorization votes in Los Angeles and San Diego. "I think it's sending a message to our governor that he's going to have to find the money otherwise there will be strikes all up and down the state. There's money, we know that. They have it, they're just spending it on other things."

Kelly is a paraprofessional in a special education classroom. "Special ed needs more support," she said. "Last time the union said, 'We'll get to you [paras] next time. Then the new board said 'No, we're not doing that,' which is very upsetting because they're always last to be handled and need so much support. We need teachers, we need smaller classrooms, we need paras we can keep because it's really hard to keep people on a part-time job."

"Our classrooms are overloaded. We need a cap size on the classrooms. So that gets me out here today as well as supporting all my teachers and students and children, and everybody who works."

"We're already chronically underfunded. It is very frustrating that we're in a wealthy city and I know a lot of our money comes from the state, some federal and some city, but we're funding billion-dollar Super Bowl parties, and ballrooms, all kinds of stuff. Let's put some money into the kids. Let's figure out why the schools are underfunded. It doesn't make sense when there's so

much wealth and there's so much inequality.

"It's this cycle that continues where the people who already have everything, get everything; and the people who need the most support don't get any. It even impacts fundraising. If you have a school where the parents work corporate or tech jobs, they often have matching funds from those businesses. But parents who work in a school and other kinds of jobs cannot pull in the same amount of money.

"There's a lot of support for us and we really appreciate it. Nurses have it rough too. We have to stand up and support each other."

Chuck has been a teacher for 21 years. "It's really the cost of living adjustments that are hardest on us," he said. "Bay Area prices have increased so much, housing has more than doubled. Everything from gas to groceries has increased drastically. Our meager salary increases have not kept up with inflation. Then there's the health benefits.

"For a beginning teacher, if you're making around \$80,000, somewhere between 20 to 25 percent of your salary is just going for health benefits. If you need specialized healthcare, that would be \$18,000 a year. We're just trying to keep up.

"I got an email that they [Kaiser nurses] were going on strike too. I support them as well, and I think it shows a bigger problem with the economy and everything right now. People are realizing that we're working really hard and supporting our economy, our youth, our elderly people, and we should be compensated for that, not just the rich getting richer.

"So many of the wealthy people in San Francisco are sending their kids to private schools, which really undermines our public schools. We want to flip that around. I think this is the start of a larger movement of labor across the state right now.

"The price of everything has skyrocketed. Salaries have not evened out. There is money out there. That's what my sign says. \$111 million is the rainy day fund. I'm not part of the bargaining team but I have heard there's closer to \$400 million in accessible funds. Taxpayers don't want the money they pay now to be spent 10 years from now when the kids have already graduated high school. That's what we're asking for: today's money for today's kids."

Alicia is a paraprofessional and has worked in the district for six years. Her daughter, Kiara, who is also a para, joined her. "I'm here to support our kids and to protect us and the teachers. We need more funding, especially the paras. We work closely with the kids. Teachers rely on our support more than anything. I'm out here to show unity and justice and to give us what we deserve. The district does not understand how challenging our jobs are. We're like second parents to the Special Education kids. We take care of them, we discipline them, we manage and know their workloads, everything. I want the district to see how hard we work and how hard these teachers work.

"Paras don't make as much as the teachers and we just want to be equal. Our job is already stressful. I have three jobs just to support my family. I live in San Francisco and what I make on para pay is not enough. The rent's going up and healthcare just went up. Buying groceries is expensive. I can't do it on one paycheck alone."

Alicia works as an usher with Cow Palace and at the Chase Center at her other two jobs. "Last night I went from being on a picket line from eight in the morning and turned around to go to my next job until nine at night."

"Special Education gets the short end of the stick a lot of the time," Tatiana told the WWSWS. She has been a para educator for five years. "It's a pattern throughout the years. It's ridiculous. We're one of the richest cities in the world and we're not paying our educators?"

She babysits on the weekends to make ends meet, working six and sometimes seven days a week. "There's no way that you can live in the city of San Francisco on a para educator's wage. It's impossible."

Tatiana referenced the concern about the burden of healthcare costs. "It creates a division between the teachers who have families and those who don't. Obviously I support my fellow teachers with families and I'm out here for them just like they're out here for me. That's always been a tactic is dividing us, and one thing that is really important is that we're all in this together."

She also voiced her support for the striking Kaiser nurses. "I recently rescheduled my Kaiser appointment to support them because they support us. I'd support a general strike. I participated in the one a few weeks ago that was called in Minneapolis. The French know how to do strikes. We should take some lessons from them."

Scarlet is a sophomore in high school who came to the rally with her brother. "My teachers have been there for me my whole life and I don't think it's fair that the district has all this money and they're not using it for the people that really matter, which are our teachers.

"My classmates are on the side of the teachers. We know they care for us so we are showing our support back. A lot of the things that the district has been putting out, like what Maria Su has been saying online, does not add up."

Scarlet also spoke about the student walkouts against ICE. "The people in power, what they are valuing is obviously not in line with what the people in this country are valuing. It's important for these walkouts to be happening because it reminds the youth that they have power. We have voices and we have a say in this.

"Just because you can't vote doesn't mean that you can't speak up. Young people should fight for the things you believe in. The youth have always been the radical people. They're supposed to be the ones that are standing up for things that no one else is. If we don't do it, then who's going to?"



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