

# Oakland, California schools axe 421 jobs following sellout contract

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The Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) has voted to eliminate more than 421 positions, following a rotten tentative agreement signed February 27 by the Oakland Education Association (OEA). The brutal cuts to an already impoverished school district are the direct product of a statewide pattern of betrayal orchestrated by the California Teachers Association (CTA).

Even the below-inflation pay bump agreed to in the new contract may be blocked by county officials citing the district's fiscal crisis. The OUSD board "approved" the raises without completing a cost analysis and without any clear means to fund them. County authorities have demanded a balanced budget by June 30.

## Statewide betrayals

The California Teachers Association, which boasts of having synchronized contracts across 32 districts through its "We Can't Wait" public relations campaign, did everything in its power to prevent those districts from uniting. It stalled for months after the contracts expired, refused to coordinate walkouts across district lines and shut down each struggle one by one—without ratification votes in some cases, without even a tentative agreement in others.

In San Francisco, 6,000 educators launched the city's first teachers' strike in nearly 50 years on February 10. After four days on the picket line, the United Educators of San Francisco accepted a two-year deal on February 13 that included a thoroughly inadequate 5 percent raise. The deal was followed by layoffs.

In Oakland, following a 91 percent strike authorization, the OEA bargaining team signed its tentative agreement on February 27, which stipulated an 11 percent raise for most educators and 13 percent for senior teachers over two years—below the rate of inflation in the Bay Area. Two days later, the school board voted 4-to-3 to cut 421 positions, roughly 10 percent of the OUSD staff.

In Los Angeles, on April 12, with a three-union strike of nearly 80,000 workers scheduled for April 14, United Teachers Los Angeles signed a tentative agreement with LAUSD just 48 hours before the planned walkout. SEIU Local 99, representing bus drivers, cafeteria workers and classroom aides, settled hours before the deadline. Democratic Mayor Karen Bass personally intervened in the last-minute talks. This was a reflection of the joint campaign

by Democratic politicians and union officials to contain the movement of workers before it could escape bureaucratic control.

In nearby Berkeley, the Berkeley Federation of Teachers ratified an even more miserable contract on February 20, providing a 3 percent annual raise over two years and a modest increase in healthcare contributions—for teachers who routinely spend \$500 of their own money on classroom supplies out of wages already inadequate to survive in one of the most expensive cities in the United States.

## The role of the Democratic Party

The Democratic Party is carrying out austerity across California. Governor Gavin Newsom and former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi play an outsize role in framing school cuts as fiscal necessity.

Alameda County Superintendent Alysse Castro, a Democrat whose election was supported by the CTA, has made clear the consequences of non-compliance: If OUSD cannot pass a balanced budget by June 30, her office will increase oversight and could move the district back into state receivership. The OEA's own leadership endorsed State Superintendent Tony Thurmond, who has for years demanded school closures and budget cuts from OUSD.

The district already faces a structural deficit of more than \$100 million for the 2026–27 school year and is burning through reserves at \$4 million per month. The SEIU contract is estimated to cost \$40 million over three years; the teachers' contract more than \$50 million. Board member Hutchinson put it bluntly: "This is the worst crisis OUSD has ever faced. Period." Oakland only recently emerged from more than two decades of state control.

State receivership looms explicitly over every negotiation. It is the threat that enforces compliance, and it is wielded by officials of the very party that union bureaucracies direct their members to vote for.

## The scale of the cuts

Among those losing positions in Oakland are literacy and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) coordinators, custodians, recruitment specialists, counselors and social workers for English language learners, and college and career readiness coordinators. The layoffs eliminate half of elementary schools' elective programs, reduce an already stretched-thin school nursing staff, and cut positions in food service, counseling, tutoring and attendance.

The job cuts hit support staff particularly hard, including staff responsible for easing newcomer students' transitions to their new schools. These transitions have become extraordinarily difficult with brutal ICE sweeps in the Bay Area. "Many of them have left family behind," one teacher noted. "Many of them are living in intense terror that their family could get torn apart at any moment."

Some schools are already scrambling to raise money through parent-teacher associations (PTA) to replace what has been cut. At Glenview Elementary, one parent reported the PTA would need to raise an additional \$305,000 to fund reading intervention, mental health counselors, enrichment and music classes. "Cuts do not land equally," the parent said. "They create a two-tiered system: schools that can privately subsidize programs and schools that cannot."

## Deindustrialization and the social crisis

Oakland already loses roughly 400 teachers every year. Nearly one in three educators in their first or second year of teaching last year did not return. Sixty percent of district teachers cannot afford to live in the city where they teach.

Oakland's student population has shrunk from 54,000 to 34,000. Thirty percent now attend privately-operated but publicly-funded charter schools.

The remaining students are disproportionately those with the highest needs: children with disabilities, English language learners and newcomer students whose families are targets of federal immigration enforcement.

Deindustrialization gutted the port and manufacturing economy that once sustained a stable working class life in East and West Oakland. The tech boom that followed enriched a narrow stratum while driving up rents and forcing working class families out of the city they built. The median home value has soared to \$730,000; 59 percent of the population rents, many facing severe cost burdens.

The public school is the last institution standing between many of these children and complete social abandonment. That institution is now being systematically dismantled.

## A history of struggle—and betrayal

Oakland teachers have a genuine tradition of militancy. The city produced the 1946 General Strike, one of the most powerful labor actions in American history. Teachers struck for seven days in 2019 and again in 2023—each time with overwhelming community support, and each time the OEA shut down the strikes before workers' demands were won.

After the 2019 strike, real wages for Oakland teachers dropped 12 percent over the life of the contract. The OEA agreed to \$22 million in district budget cuts and the closure of Roots International Academy. In 2023, seeking to prevent a repeat in which militant teachers nearly overrode the union's effort to end the strike, the OEA shut it down without a membership vote. The bureaucracy then dangled a \$5,000 signing bonus to pressure members into accepting a "no strike" pledge in advance of the school closures and budget cuts the contract subsequently enabled.

This past February, 91 percent of OEA members voted to authorize a strike—a near-total mandate. The bureaucracy suppressed it, just as it suppressed the two strikes before that.

## The way forward

The fight for public education as a social right requires organizations independent of the union apparatus and both major political parties—rank-and-file committees in every school, coordinating across district lines, capable of waging the kind of unified struggle that the conditions, and Oakland's own history of militancy, show to be entirely possible.

*Are you an Oakland teacher, student or parent? Contact the WSWS to discuss conditions in your school or to get involved in building rank-and-file committees.*



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