

Oakland, California teachers hold wildcat “sickout”

By Jonathan Burleigh
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Teachers from at least five Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) high schools are conducting a wildcat “sickout” strike today to protest threatened budget cuts, school closures and deteriorating conditions. They are also angered over the working a year and a half without a contract due to the long-stalled negotiations between the district and the Oakland Education Association (OEA), the local affiliate of the California Teachers Association (CTA) and National Education Association (NEA).

The OEA and district are currently in the final, state-mediated “fact-finding” phase of contract negotiations. After this anti-democratic process in which three individuals will determine a “fair” contract for teachers, the union legally has the right to strike.

Thirty thousand teachers in Los Angeles, who have been working without a contract for a year, have also been dragged through this state-regulated “fact-finding” process with a report due this week. If no agreement is reached, teachers in the nation’s second largest school district could strike next month.

The conditions faced by educators and students in Oakland are dire, but the state’s Fiscal Crisis Management and Assistance Team (FCMAT) and the Alameda County Superintendent of Public Schools, Karen Monroe, are demanding up to \$60 million in budget cuts over the next two years. If these demands are not met, they are threatening a renewed state takeover, as occurred in 2003.

These savage cuts follow decades of austerity that have produced overcrowded classes, under-staffing, a high turnover rate among teachers and routine violations of special education service requirements. Further, the rising cost of living in Oakland—which now ranks as the fourth most expensive city in the US—has forced thousands of students and their families into homelessness or abject poverty.

To carry out the budget cuts, OUSD Superintendent Kyla Johnson-Trammell presented on November 14 an initial report suggesting the closure or merger 23 out of 76 OUSD schools, or roughly a third. Last year, the school board cut \$9 million from the budget, and it has proposed a further \$16.5 million for the upcoming school year, including removing up to 340 positions. In her email explaining the presentation, Johnson-Trammell stated that while closing district schools, the

school board “must work together with charter schools.”

The creation of new charter schools, which siphon off funding from public schools, will only deepen the crisis in education. A May 2018 study, titled “Breaking Point: The Cost of Charter Schools for Public School Districts,” found that charter schools cost OUSD just over \$57 million each year, nearly equal to the cuts being demanded.

The call for a preemptive wildcat sickout strike arose out of dissatisfaction with the OEA, with Oakland High English teacher Miles Murray telling the *San Francisco Chronicle*, “We felt it was time to go out ahead of them. People were sick of the very slow moving and uninspiring actions being proposed by the union itself.”

Throughout the decades-long assault on public education, the OEA has been a willing accomplice. The union endorsed budget cuts last year, only quibbling on the total amount. “They do have to cut in order to make the \$1.2 million reserve, that’s a legal requirement,” said then-OEA President Trish Gorham, “but that’s \$5 or \$6 million, not \$9 million.”

During the nationwide teacher strikes earlier in the year, the union maintained absolute silence out of fear that Oakland teachers would try to join or support the strike wave.

In the nearly three weeks since the superintendent outlined her plan for school closures, the union has not issued any statement on the matter to its membership. The OEA has done nothing to organize teachers or prepare them for a strike, not even the basic task of holding a strike authorization vote.

Monday’s sickout was initiated at Oakland High School, where roughly 60 teachers collectively agreed to participate in today’s strike. As awareness of this planned action spread to other schools last Friday, a majority of teachers at Madison Park Academy, Fremont High School, Oakland Technical High School and Castlemont High School all agreed to join. At most sites, there will be pickets during the first hour of school, followed by a rally at Oscar Grant Plaza until 1pm.

When news reached the district, Johnson-Trammell sent a threatening email to teachers, writing, “A ‘sick out’ is an illegal labor action. Teachers who call in sick under these circumstances will potentially be subject to disciplinary action and loss of pay.”

In closing the email the school superintendent said, “It may

be helpful for any concerned teacher to check in with Oakland Education Association leadership regarding when these types of actions are legal.” In other words, she encourages teachers to speak with union officials about “legal” forms of protest, knowing full well that the union is opposed to any movement from below by teachers.

Johnson-Trammell’s efforts to intimidate teachers have been met with contempt, with one second-year Special Education teacher telling the WSWS: “That email was infuriating, and shows that the Superintendent is opposed to our fight to improve public education. Personally, this has only emboldened me to call in sick Monday.”

Oakland teachers entering into struggle need to absorb the lessons of the teacher strikes in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona and other states earlier this year. In each case, the upsurge of educators, which was initiated by rank-and-file educators, not the unions, was brought under the control of the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). The unions accepted deals that did nothing to address the demands of teachers for substantial improvements in pay and state funding, and they sought to channel the opposition of teachers behind the election campaign of the corporate-controlled Democratic Party.

Democrat like Obama and Governor Jerry Brown, no less than the Republicans, have systematically dismantled public education and shifted funding to for-profit charter schools and other corporate-driven “school reform” schemes. Both parties have relied on the NEA and AFT to isolate teachers state-by-state and district-by-district in order to prevent popular opposition to their policies.

While there are plenty of public assets unnecessarily squandered by the school board, the crisis in Oakland cannot be blamed simply on local corruption, nor can it be solved within the district alone. Students and teachers in Oakland share common problems with their counterparts across the country, from rural West Virginia, to the Pacific Northwest, to the middle of the East Coast.

Funding for public education has been diverted to bailout the banks, provide massive tax cuts to giant corporations like Amazon and General Motors and to fund endless wars fought to defend interests of the same ruling elite that is looting society.

From Reagan, to Bush Sr., to Clinton, to Bush Jr., to Obama, and now Trump, every administration has overseen declining per-pupil funding, massive teacher layoffs and the erosion of infrastructure. In California, the Democrats have controlled the state legislature for over 50 years and pushed for the privatization of public education through charter schools no less than Republicans—a process in which Governor Brown, the former Mayor of Oakland and himself a charter school owner, has led.

In 2003, Brown helped orchestrate the state takeover of OUSD alongside Democratic state senator Don Perata. The

Democrats, coordinating with FCMAT and the state attorney general, conspired to force the district to accept a \$100 million state loan and direct state control of the district in order to cover a \$27 million budget deficit.

Today’s coordinated job action demonstrates that teachers want to fight. They want to defend their jobs and living standards and they deeply believe that working-class and immigrant children, not only the sons and daughters of the wealthy, have a right to high quality education.

This is part of a growing demand of workers around the world to end austerity and social inequality. Over the past month, the French working class has mobilized *en masse* to oppose the reactionary government of the former financier Emmanuel Macron, the “president of the rich.” The “yellow vest” protests have drawn over 100,000 protesters over the past two weekends and are being brutally attacked by the police.

It is a lie to say there is no money for public education when the wealth of one Silicon Valley oligarch, Mark Zuckerberg, could double state funding for K-12 public education across California.

The unions will not challenge the dictatorial control of the banks and big business over society. The NEA and AFT are led by officials like Randi Weingarten, who makes \$513,000 a year, and are part of the richest one, two and three percent of society.

In order to carry their struggle forward, Oakland teachers must establish independent, rank-and-file committees at every school and in every neighborhood, uniting with students and their families. These committees must turn out to broader sections of the working class in Oakland and the Bay Area, including teachers in every school district, as well as UPS, Amazon and Tesla workers, whose children attend public schools and also face the same conditions.

They must forge links with Los Angeles teachers and build for a statewide strike and nationwide strike to defend the right to public education.

This must be connected with the building of a powerful political movement of the working class against capitalism and for a vast redistribution of wealth to meet the needs of society.

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