

# The 2019 Oakland Teachers' Strike

## A Reflection and Analysis



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## Roots of the Strike Wave

The Oakland teachers strike of 2019 was part of a nationwide movement to defend public education. The strike wave began in West Virginia in 2018 and quickly spread to Oklahoma, Arizona, Kentucky, North Carolina, Colorado, and California. In each state, educators confronted similar conditions: large class sizes, low wages, understaffing, and a lack of classroom resources.

These conditions are not unique to the United States, nor to the education sector. They are a natural outcome of the functioning of capitalism. In the last few decades, the U.S. ruling class has gutted and privatized education, transportation, healthcare, and other public services. This systematic attack on the working class intensified following the economic crisis of 2008, as the elite imposed harsh austerity measures and slashed workers' pensions and benefits. Millions lost their homes and were left destitute, while the billionaires prospered. About 95% of the income gained in the first three years of the so-called "recovery" (2009-2012) went to the top one percent, making it in effect a large-scale robbery.<sup>1</sup> This concentration of wealth and power has resulted in eight billionaires owning as much wealth as the poorest half of the world's population (3.7 billion people).

The impact on the public education system has been devastating. Today, teachers and students face larger class sizes, dilapidated buildings, outdated textbooks, and a severe shortage of

counselors, nurses, and social workers. The statistics paint a clear picture:

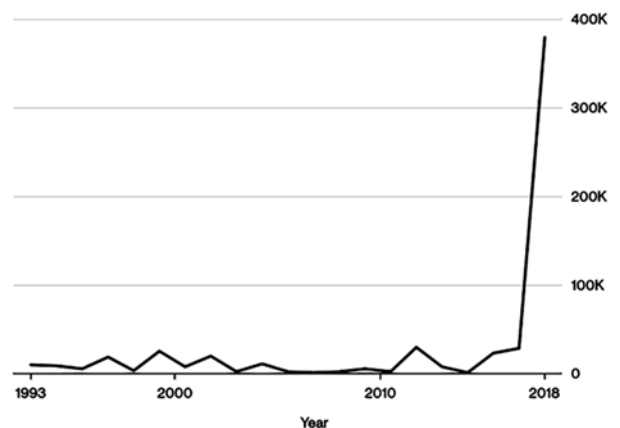
- Since 2008, the number of K-12 students has increased by 1,419,000, while the number of teachers and school workers has decreased by 135,000.<sup>2</sup>
- Twenty-nine states spent less per student in 2017 than they did in 2007.<sup>3</sup>
- Average teacher pay, adjusted for inflation, has decreased by four percent in the decade after 2008.<sup>4</sup>
- One in five teachers works a second job.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, schools are severely affected by the worsening living conditions of students. According to the National Center for Children in Poverty, more than 40% of children in the U.S. grow up in poverty.<sup>6</sup> In a land of agricultural abundance,

### Join the Picket Line

2018 broke records for teacher strikes. At eight major strikes, teachers protested the most since at least 1993. Many were statewide, including North Carolina, Arizona and Oklahoma, leading to far larger strikes than previous years.

Number of School Staff Striking



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

Bloomberg Government

<sup>1</sup> "95% Of Income Gains Since 2009 Went To The Top 1% — Here's What That Really Means," Business Insider

<sup>2</sup> "A Punishing Decade for School Funding", CBPP

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Red State Revolt, Eric Blanc, 2019

<sup>5</sup> "More Teachers are Working Part-Time Jobs to Pay the Bills", Vox

<sup>6</sup> "America's Child Poverty Rate Remains Stubbornly High Despite Important Progress", NCCP

nearly 42 million people experience food insecurity on a regular basis.<sup>7</sup> Among industrialized nations, the U.S. has the highest rates of infant mortality, obesity, and consumption of anti-depressants. It also boasts the largest prison population in the world.<sup>8</sup>

In the midst of this daily violence against students and their families, teachers are expected to produce perfect lesson plans and high test scores. The message from the corporate media and the privatizers of education is clear: low academic achievement isn't an indictment of a failing system that abandons millions of young people to poverty, it's the result of "bad teachers."

## Why Privatize?

The attacks on public services have led to the privatization of public schools in many parts of the world. New Orleans stands as a model for this process. Following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, many schools were destroyed and countless students were displaced. Privatizers utilized this chaos and confusion after the hurricane to dismantle New Orleans' public-school system. Within two years, 57% of students were in charter schools, which are publicly-funded, but privately operated. The process was completed in 2019, when the last public school was closed, making New Orleans the first 100% charter school city in the country.

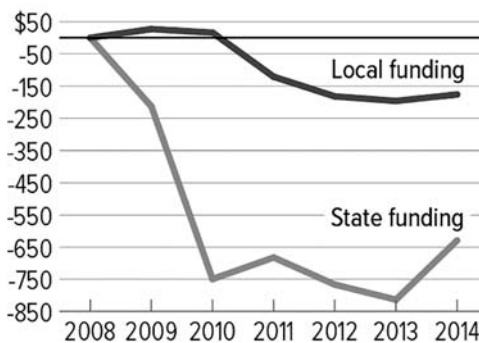
Of course, the drive for privatization is an international effort. In Puerto Rico, following Hurricane Maria, the same forces descended; they closed

hundreds of public schools and introduced vouchers and charter schools.<sup>9</sup> Investors like Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg have poured millions of dollars into Bridge International Academies, a for-profit network of private schools operating in several African countries.<sup>10</sup> In the U.K., the Conservative Party has advocated for turning all public schools into privately funded academies. And in Chile, a voucher system initiated during General Pinochet's dictatorship devastated the public education system, with less than half of Chile's students currently attending public schools.<sup>11</sup>

Just like in Chile, privatization in the U.S. is not new. Major support for charter schools began during the Clinton administration and has enjoyed bipartisan support ever since. The Clinton era White House website touted the fact that "the Clinton-Gore Administration has worked to expand

### K-12 Funding Fell Sharply After Recession Hit

Change in funding per pupil compared to 2008, inflation adjusted



Note: Excludes Hawaii and Indiana due to lack of data.

Source: CBPP analysis of U.S. Census Bureau, "Public Education Finances: 2014"

<sup>7</sup> "Household Food Security in the United States in 2017, *USDA*"

<sup>8</sup> "World Prison Populations", *BBC*

<sup>9</sup> "Puerto Rico Is in Turmoil, But Dramatic Changes to Its Schools Might Endure", *Education Week*

<sup>10</sup> "Uganda orders schools funded by Mark Zuckerberg, Bill Gates to close", *UPI*

<sup>11</sup> "The Chile school where pupils carry petrol bombs over pencils", *BBC*

public school choice and support the growth of public charter schools.”<sup>12</sup> In 2000, the Democratic Party platform called for tripling the number of charter schools.<sup>13</sup> The charter industry received a further boost by Bush’s disastrous No Child Left Behind legislation, and then again under Obama, who championed charter schools and called them “incubators of innovation.”

These supposed education reforms celebrated by the politicians are an assault on the possibility for public schools to provide a real education. Charterization places the schools and curriculum under the direct control of the corporations that own the schools. The goal of preparing students to be obedient workers in the capitalist economy becomes more overt. This has always been a feature of public education, as it is a product of capitalism itself. However, many charter schools serving working-class populations take this a few steps further, by adopting strict disciplinary measures to control their students. At charter school chains like KIPP Academy (Knowledge Is Power Program), students are subjected to military-style discipline, known as the “no excuses” model. Students who don’t line up correctly, sit up straight and track the teacher with their eyes, or immediately obey instructions, are punished with consequences ranging from standing in front of the class to suspension and expulsion.<sup>14</sup> The atmosphere is so repressive that students jokingly refer to KIPP as “Kids In Prison Prep.” At another infamous charter chain, Success Academy Charter Schools in New York, a school administrator

emailed the following demands to fourth grade teachers: “We can NOT let up on them...Any scholar who is not using the plan of attack will go to effort academy, have their parent called, and will miss electives. This is serious business, and there has to be misery felt for the kids who are not doing what is expected of them.”<sup>15</sup>

In addition, privatization provides an additional source of revenue for private corporations. The government spends up to \$700 billion per year in the education sector, a pot of money that Wall Street set its sights on decades ago.<sup>16</sup> The privatization of education services and the intense focus on standardized testing put some of those tax dollars into the hands of the 1%.

Privatization also provides an opportunity to crush the teachers’ unions, which can provide some defense of teachers’ wages, benefits, and working conditions. Very few charter schools and private education-service providers are unionized, so whenever charter schools and private services expand in a city, unions are decimated, leaving education workers even more vulnerable to attacks by their employers. Teachers are the primary target in this process because their salaries and benefits constitute the largest portion (60%) of education spending. Other victims of privatization are the staff who provide school services such as food, libraries, and maintenance. As these services are outsourced to private companies and contractors, the workers either lose their jobs, or their jobs become more precarious and lower paid. In

<sup>12</sup> “An Unprecedented Commitment to Education and Unprecedented Results”, The White House

<sup>13</sup> “Democrats Once Proposed Tripling Charter Schools. Here’s What’s Changed”, *Education Week*

<sup>14</sup> “Charter Schools Are Suspending Kids More Than Other Schools, And That’s A Problem,” *Huffpost*

<sup>15</sup> “‘Work Hard, Be Hard.’ How KIPP’s No Excuses Model Fails Students and Teachers Alike” *Alternet*

<sup>16</sup> “The Big Enchilada,” Jonathan Kozol, *Harper’s*

addition, most workers no longer participate in state-run pension plans with defined benefit plans.

## **Education: A Reflection of Society**

Privatization and the public-school strikes have highlighted the big questions about education in our society. Whose schools are these? What is the purpose of education?

Education in every society serves the existing order and socializes young people to function within it. Under capitalism, the education system teaches the majority to serve the 1%. Students are socialized to accept and integrate into a system that is geared solely toward the generation of corporate profits. Schools teach young people to accept a system based on exploitation and oppression. Since our society is divided into classes, the school system reflects those divisions. The children of the elite are educated to become the next generation of managers and business owners. Working-class children are prepared for a life of grinding labor – crammed into overcrowded classrooms and forced to endure endless testing and rote exercises, or pushed out of the schools into the margins of society or its prisons.

To cover up the functioning of this vicious and inhumane system, the media and the schools highlight the success stories of individual students and select schools. They encourage an individualistic mindset that prizes competition and personal success above all else. The message of these stories is clear: work hard to get out of the rat race, leave everyone else behind, and above all, accept the way

things are, because there's nothing we can do to change this society.

All schools reflect this social order, and the schools in Oakland are no different. Like most schools in California, Oakland schools are severely underfunded and segregated. Before the Oakland strike, there were just 21 nurses for the city's 36,000 students, and only one counselor for every 600 students.<sup>17</sup> High school teachers had up to 35 students crammed into their classrooms. While it refused to provide sufficient funds for counselors and nurses, the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) spent \$6 million per year to fund its own school police department. (Oakland is the only school district in the San Francisco Bay Area with its own police force.)<sup>18</sup> Teacher pay was the lowest in Alameda County and among the lowest in the nation when adjusted for cost of living.<sup>19</sup> As a result, one in five teachers leave Oakland schools every single year, so many students never have a stable core of teachers at their schools. This turnover is highly disruptive for staff as well, as it hinders the formation of effective teams of educators.

Oakland is also the testing ground for the billionaires' ongoing efforts to take over public education in California.<sup>20</sup> In Oakland there were 87 public schools and 34 charter schools at the time of the strike. About 30% of Oakland's students attend a charter school – the highest proportion in the state. While Oakland charter schools receive 28% of OUSD's special education funding, they enroll only 19% of the students with learning

<sup>17</sup> These and other statistics cited are drawn from the OUSD website: [www.ousd.org](http://www.ousd.org), [ousddata.org/public-dashboards.html](http://ousddata.org/public-dashboards.html)

<sup>18</sup> "Oakland Unified seeks to make schools safer without guns," *ABC 7 News*

<sup>19</sup> "Oakland teacher pay among lowest in U.S.," *The Mercury News*

<sup>20</sup> "Oakland is California's Destroy Public Education Petri Dish," *Tultican*

disabilities, and just 2% of students with multiple disabilities.<sup>21</sup>

The charterization of Oakland's public schools has not happened by accident. Billionaires like Eli Broad, Michael Bloomberg, the Walton Family (Walmart), and Netflix CEO Reed Hastings have poured millions of dollars into efforts to pass pro-charter legislation and elect pro-charter school board candidates in cities from Los Angeles to Oakland. In Oakland, for example, pro-charter PACs have donated \$1.2 million to Oakland School Board candidates since 2012. In the 2018 School Board elections, two candidates ran unopposed and Gary Yee, a pro-charter Oakland School Board candidate, received nearly \$150,000,<sup>22</sup> including \$120,000 from pro-charter donor Michael Bloomberg.<sup>23</sup> In return, Oakland's school board has threatened to close or consolidate up to 24 public schools. If they are successful with these closures, they will likely turn these facilities over to new charter schools or to large real estate developers. Their history shows little doubt as to their intentions: since 2004, OUSD has shut down 19 public schools, over half of which were then handed over to charter operators.<sup>24</sup>

Teachers, students, and community members also face the rapid gentrification of Oakland, which is linked to the rapid growth of charter schools.<sup>25</sup> Between 2011 and 2016, the median rent in

Oakland increased by \$1,100. A city that was 47% Black in 1980<sup>26</sup> has seen that number decline to an estimated 23.6% in 2018,<sup>27</sup> as Black families have been pushed out of their homes and neighborhoods. A 2017 study found that "the likelihood of gentrification in racially isolated neighborhoods of color increases by up to 22 percentage points – roughly twice the baseline likelihood for such communities – after the expansion of school choice [charter schools]." The availability of these charters "elevate the neighborhood's cost of living, and ultimately, displace residents of color to less desirable locations."<sup>28</sup>

And the list goes on and on – any statistical measure we examine reflects the realities of racism and segregation in Oakland and in this society, whether it be unemployment rates, incarceration rates, or household wealth. The poorest sections of the working-class live in segregated neighborhoods, attend segregated, underfunded schools, and are under constant attack from the 1%. So when we examine the education system, it's a reflection and indictment of a bankrupt society that brutally destroys its most vulnerable members.

## **Not Broke!**

Over and over again, teachers, students, and community members have been told that they should accept the conditions in Oakland's schools

<sup>21</sup> [www.inthepublicinterest.org/wp-content/uploads/ITPI\\_Breaking\\_Point\\_May2018FINAL.pdf](http://www.inthepublicinterest.org/wp-content/uploads/ITPI_Breaking_Point_May2018FINAL.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> "How a Handful of Pro-Charter Billionaires Flooded Oakland's School Board Elections With Cash," *East Bay Express*

<sup>23</sup> "Charter school supporters and critics are big spenders in some Bay Area school board," *EdSource*

<sup>24</sup> [tinyurl.com/OUSDclosures2004](http://tinyurl.com/OUSDclosures2004)

<sup>25</sup> "Ed school dean: Urban school reform is really about land development (not kids)" *The Washington Post*

<sup>26</sup> 1980 Bay Area census

<sup>27</sup> Population 2018 US Census

<sup>28</sup> "School Choice, Gentrification, and the Variable Significance of Racial Stratification in Urban Neighborhoods," *Sociology of Education* (paywall), or for a free article summarizing these findings, see: "An integration dilemma: School choice is pushing wealthy families to gentrify neighborhoods but avoid local schools," *Chalkbeat*

because the District is broke.<sup>29</sup> However, Oakland has ended five of the last six years with a budget surplus. And a 2019 study concluded that the proliferation of charter schools in Oakland costs public schools up to \$57 million per year.<sup>30</sup> OUSD also spends \$95 million more per year on non-classroom costs compared to the Bay Area district median.<sup>31</sup> This is tremendous waste considering that the District's overall budget is around \$560 million in 2019-2020.

Even if that waste were eliminated, however, more funding would be needed to adequately serve Oakland's poor and working-class students. And we don't have to look very far for the money to accomplish that. There are 74 billionaires in the Bay Area, the third-highest concentration of billionaires in the world.<sup>32</sup> Oakland is home to Kaiser Permanente, Pandora, and Clorox. Billions of dollars in goods flow through the Oakland Port every year. California is the fifth largest economy in the world, yet it spends only \$12,000 per student.<sup>33</sup> (By comparison, the state of New York spends more than \$22,000 per student).<sup>34</sup>

## The Oakland Teachers Strike

There was nothing new about the abysmal learning conditions that students faced in Oakland in the build-up to the strike. What was new was that teachers, students, and parents had had enough and decided to fight back. This culminated in a seven-day strike from February 21 to March 1, 2019. At the time of the strike about 3,000 teachers, nurses, counselors, speech pathologists,

psychologists, social workers, and librarians made up the membership of the Oakland Education Association (OEA).

OEA's leadership consists of five officers and a twelve-member Executive Board that meets twice a month – all elected by the union membership. In addition, schools elect one union representative (“rep”) for every 15 members. (Reps are similar to stewards in other unions.) The Rep Council, consisting of the reps and Executive Board, meets once a month as a policy-making body.

The OEA is a local of the California Teachers Association (CTA), a statewide union which has nearly 310,000 members in 1,100 chapters across the state. The OEA and the CTA are both affiliated with the National Education Association (NEA), a national teachers union that includes three million members. The CTA and the NEA receive the lion's share (about 80%) of the dues paid by the OEA members.

## The New Leadership Faced Many Challenges

To have an accurate balance sheet of the strike, first we have to take stock of where the teachers started. Oakland teachers worked without a contract throughout 2017-2018. For many years, there had been a low level of rank-and-file activity and there were few organizing connections across schools. Many schools didn't even have reps.

Teachers, staff, students, and families hadn't participated in any large-scale, organized activity to fight back against the cuts and closures in quite

<sup>29</sup> “Oakland School Board Approves \$22M In Budget Cuts Amid Student Protests,” *CBS Bay Area*

<sup>30</sup> “Report: The Cost of Charter Schools for Public School Districts,” *In the Public Interest*

<sup>31</sup> “Grand jury: Oakland Unified wastes millions each year on administration, consultants,” *East Bay Times*

<sup>32</sup> “Bay Area has third largest billionaire population in the world,” *Curbed SF*

<sup>33</sup> “Education Spending Per Student by State,” *Governing*

<sup>34</sup> “NY per-pupil spending reaches \$23k,” *Empire Center*

some time. Many members have described the OEA leadership during that time period as bureaucratic and top-down.

At the end of the 2017-2018 school year, OEA members elected a new leadership slate, Build Our Power (BOP), that campaigned on a platform of racial justice, union democracy, and transitioning the union from a passive “service model” to an active “organizing model” that could go on strike if necessary.

The new leadership inherited the bargaining team that had been put in place by the former union leadership. Unfortunately, they continued the acceptance of a traditional confidential bargaining process. This process, which is accepted by most unions today, keeps the specifics of the bargaining secret from members. Just about everyone else involved – the bargaining teams, politicians (local and state), school board members, and district administrators – are all in on the specifics of the negotiations. This means that the people who are actually impacted by bargaining (teachers, students and their families) have no knowledge or say in it, until some sort of agreement is reached without their input. Then the Rep Council and the membership get to vote on the proposed contract.

The newly elected leadership also inherited the May 2018 bargaining proposal of the former leadership. It was very modest. The main demands were:

- A 12% raise for teachers over three years
- Reduce class sizes by four students in high-needs schools and two in all other schools
- Reduce the student-to-counselor ratio from 600:1 to 250:1

- Reduce the student-to-nurse ratio to 750:1

The new OEA leadership’s vocal opposition to privatization and their highlighting of racial justice issues in Oakland struck a chord with many members. After their election, they faced the task of resuscitating the union. They set to work to renew some of the organizing structures that had deteriorated or disappeared under the previous leadership. They proposed to expand member participation in the union, as well as extend community outreach. They faced an additional challenge since the majority of Oakland teachers had never participated in a real strike, as the last multi-day teachers strike in Oakland occurred in 1996.

To meet these various challenges, the union leadership used a playbook designed by Labor Notes and Jane McAlevey.<sup>35</sup> Such organizing methods, which are being studied and applied in a number of unions across the country, have been helpful in pushing unions out of long slumps of inactivity, most famously in the 2012 Chicago teachers strike. They are useful methods when it comes to the daunting task of replacing a bureaucratic local union leadership with a more inclusive and member-friendly one, as well as for preparing union members to decide to go on strike. But they do not develop a truly democratic model where the leadership must be open and accountable to the membership, and the membership can participate in the decision-making process.

To this end, in the summer of 2018 the new OEA leadership led training sessions for reps to create site organizing squads. And when the fall semester began, the new leadership engaged in a race against time to prepare for a possible strike.

<sup>35</sup> *How to Jump-Start Your Union, a Labor Notes Book; No Shortcuts*, Jane McAlevey, 2016



They held bi-weekly organizing meetings, which started with a handful of people and expanded up to 50 participants before the strike. They also went to multiple school sites and worked to engage teachers in the union and ensure that almost every school had a union representative. Their attempts were largely successful, as many more members became active participants at their sites and in other formal union structures. But this strategy did not allow the newly activated teachers to participate in the decision-making processes of organizing and conducting the strike. This top-down approach placed significant limits on the possibilities of the strike.

Throughout the fall, the union leadership focused some of its energy on the election of a pro-union candidate to the Oakland School Board. Oakland's School Board has seven Directors, each elected from a specific geographic region of the city. In the end, the OEA-backed candidate, Clarissa Doutherd, was defeated by pro-charter candidate Gary Yee.

During this time the District refused to consider even the very modest proposals put forward by the bargaining team, so the negotiating process reached the impasse phase. A strike was no longer a possibility – it was a virtual certainty. The new leadership was now engaged in a race against time to prepare for a strike. The next stage was fact finding,<sup>36</sup> in which a supposedly neutral arbitrator reviews the proposals from both sides and comes up with a report and recommendations.

Toward the end of December, the OEA leadership began to reactivate the union's cluster system. Representatives of the school sites were grouped

into seven geographical "clusters," each with a cluster leader, with an additional cluster for substitute teachers, nurses, psychologists, psychiatric social workers, therapists, and other workers who move between sites. This was an effective way to link the 87 schools together. In addition, each school was asked to choose a picket captain to help with the daily strike coordination at their schools.

OEA's strike-preparation playbook – though it included some important and essential preliminary work – was limited. Almost all efforts were directed at getting the various school sites to be "strike ready," that is, in registering members' support and their commitment to a strike. As a result, most members simply waited passively. Those members who chose to be active in the union, though they were welcomed by the leadership, were expected to simply help implement decisions that were made in advance by the small group of union leaders.

Although this led to gaps in the strike preparations, it also created openings for rank-and-file organizers to assume more responsibilities. Teachers developed an organizing packet, created and translated leaflets, organized merchant walks in their school neighborhoods, led parent meetings, developed PowerPoints and other materials to aid other teachers in organizing at their sites, and wrote press releases and contacted media for actions they organized.

At the more active schools, some teachers felt a growing frustration with what they perceived as the slow pace of the union's activity. They decided to organize their own actions. In early December, a group of about 100 high school teachers organized

<sup>36</sup> During fact-finding, each side appoints a representative to present their position and evidence to a supposedly neutral arbitrator, who then makes a non-binding recommendation.

a “sick out” (essentially a one-day wildcat strike) and marched to the school district office in downtown Oakland. The media gave this action very positive coverage and the prospect of a teachers strike gained some favorable publicity. In mid-January there was another sick out, this time with 400 teachers and 100 students from 12 schools. Almost no elementary school teachers participated, as this would have burdened parents with young children. Again, the media coverage was favorable, and the teachers who participated felt empowered and enthusiastic about the experience.

In the two months leading up to the strike, the teachers’ involvement increased. The union leadership organized informational pickets, protests, and some community outreach. This included very successful merchant walks, during which people approached local businesses and asked them to put up window signs supporting Oakland teachers. In January, they organized a Rally to Defend Public Education in the East Bay, attended by several hundred people throughout the Bay Area. They also mobilized teachers to attend an Oakland City Council meeting to ask for support for their contract demands. After that meeting, and continued outreach from the union leadership, the City Council agreed to open the city’s recreation centers for students during the strike. And in an impressive display of solidarity, over 200 teachers, students, and parents showed up at a School Board meeting to oppose the Board’s closure of Roots International Academy, a small middle school in a low-income, majority-Black and Latino neighborhood in East Oakland. These actions helped teachers develop more connections between the different schools. “Clusters” began to get better organized, with site reps taking responsibility for organizing their sites and coordinating with other sites in the

cluster to carry out proposed activities, as well as initiating some activities themselves.

The union leadership decided that a strike call would be timed with the announcement of the fact-finder’s recommendations. It was expected that the recommendations would fall short of the union’s proposal, so the strike was all but certain.

By this point, there was a growing desire among some site representatives to have more of a say in the decision-making process. As the date of the strike approached, the Rep Council passed a motion demanding daily updates from the bargaining team. Unfortunately, this motion was a dead letter because the leadership had previously agreed to confidential bargaining. Many reps were also concerned that there could be an attempt to rush to push through a new contract, as had recently happened at the end of the Los Angeles teachers strike. When the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA), reached a tentative agreement with the district on January 22, many teachers didn’t have enough time to read and discuss the contract before voting. Anticipating this, OEA reps passed a motion giving the membership at least 24 hours to read and review any new contract



Picket line at United for Success/Life Academy

proposal before voting on it. Both motions passed nearly unanimously. Another motion to include the demand for no school closures in the bargaining process passed unanimously. This echoed the opposition against school closures that had been included in two public letters previously sent by the OEA president to Oakland School District officials.

## **On the Picket Lines**

The strike began on February 21, 2019. It was a tremendous display of unity between teachers, students, families, and the community. At least 90% of the teachers respected the picket lines, and at least 80% of teachers picketed each day. The low level of scabbing helped build a real sense of unity at most sites. Teachers commented over and over again that one of the best parts of the strike was getting to know their co-workers and escaping the isolation of their classrooms and daily lives. People said things like “I actually know the people at my school now.”

Teachers took responsibility for their picket lines, joined by students, families, staff, and community members, and demonstrated tremendous creativity, initiative, and engagement. At some of the larger schools, a party-like atmosphere prevailed, as teachers, students, staff, and parents drummed, sang, and chanted. At some schools, picketers marched to the freeway overpasses, formed dance squads, and cooked on portable camp stoves. The large high schools often had the strongest picket lines, including student participation, while at a few of the smaller schools it required a determined effort just to maintain minimal picket lines. At some schools, teachers organized daily discussions, where they talked about the state of the strike, decided what to do

each day, and raised political questions. Although these meetings were limited to certain sites, they were the start of a nucleus of collective decision making.

On a typical day, teachers picketed at their sites in the morning, attended a city-wide noon rally, and then returned to their sites for afternoon picketing. The city-wide actions were decided by the union leadership and announced to the strikers daily by their picket captains. These rallies usually ended with a march to a pre-selected target. For example, on one day the strikers marched to the Oakland offices of a major privatization group, GO Public Schools, and on another to the building where negotiations were taking place. Unfortunately, the lack of informational flyers about these targets, an inadequate sound system, and the size of the crowd often prevented people from knowing the goal of the demonstration. In addition, there were no flyers produced by the union to hand out to the public during these marches, to explain what the strike was about and to rally more active support for it. One of the most memorable midday actions was a two-mile march through East Oakland, proposed by rank-and-file teachers to highlight opposition to the closure of Roots International Academy. Community members cheered from their homes and small businesses, honked car horns, and lined the street to show support.

## **Classified Workers**

Classified staff, who provide essential support at the schools from front-desk operations to janitorial work, are represented by two unions: SEIU (Service Employees International Union) and AFSCME (American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees). Neither union called for a solidarity strike. A solidarity strike would

have given a legal cover for the classified workers to strike with the teachers, which could have strengthened the strike significantly. In that event, there would have been nobody other than the principals to “baby-sit” the few students who came to school, greatly increasing the pressure on the District to settle the strike. At a few schools, teachers reached out to classified staff on their own accord. As a result, there were classified workers who respected the picket lines and even picketed with teachers throughout the strike or took a few “sick days” in solidarity. At many schools, however, classified staff felt compelled to work each day. As a result, in some schools, the strike created anger and divisions between the striking teachers and classified staff, most of whom did not join the strike.

## **Community Support**

At many schools, families participated in the strike, walking the picket lines, leading chants, and dropping off food. Community members showed strong solidarity with the teachers, too, and just like the students’ families, they brought food, joined the picket lines and midday rallies, and donated to the strike fund. At many schools the homemade food, coffee, and donuts overflowed the tables. However, at a few schools with low levels of community and family participation, the lack of broader engagement made the strike experience challenging and even demoralizing.

Some teachers from seven charter schools joined at least one day of the strike, and many small businesses and restaurants offered discounts or even free food and drinks to teachers. A movie theater screened movies for \$1 admission, an Oakland museum and a local amusement park offered free admission, and public libraries

extended their hours for students. The DSA (Democratic Socialists of America) also offered their support to the leadership and played an important role in logistics. They produced union media, and initiated an online fundraiser, “Bread for Ed,” which raised \$172,000 for food for students at the solidarity schools and teachers and supporters on the picket lines. The strike received very favorable media coverage, and there was tremendous support from the community at large. Picket lines received daily streams of honks, waves, and raised fists as a show of support.

One of the most important outcomes of the strike was that teachers, parents, students, staff, and community members stood together and experienced an intense feeling of solidarity with thousands of other human beings. Despite being stressed out and overwhelmed, many of the strikers felt a sense of collective joy and camaraderie that they had rarely experienced.

## **Solidarity Schools**

For working parents with small children, supporting the strike posed a challenge. Recognizing that families’ support would be crucial, the union leaders had reached out to the community before the strike, and as a result of their efforts, several community organizations, Oakland Parks and Recreation centers, and churches in Oakland provided space for solidarity schools and union meetings.

Leading up to the strike, however, the leadership of OEA and CTA had not consistently encouraged teachers to take responsibility for setting up solidarity schools. They feared possible liability issues, and expected that parents and community members would take on this responsibility. As a result, there weren’t enough solidarity

schools in place, and it quickly became obvious that it was essential to have spaces where students could go without having to cross the picket lines. Some teachers, parents, and community organizations then became consumed in a last-minute scramble to find locations and people that could take responsibility for running solidarity schools. Their efforts proved invaluable, as 97% of the students stayed out of school.



A solidarity school in East Oakland

## Picket Captain Meetings

The picket captains had the closest connections with teachers on the picket lines. At the end of each day, picket captains from each school met with cluster leaders and a handful of union officials. Picket captains reported on the day's activities at their site, and received instructions from the leadership for the next day. Unfortunately, they had no real decision-making power beyond coordinating the picket line activity at their sites. This became an ongoing source of frustration among the picket captains, who were the key links to the majority of the teachers on the picket lines.

## CTA: a Roadblock to the Strike

On day two of the strike, CTA staffers called in State Superintendent Tony Thurmond to calm the waters. There was nothing surprising about this approach, as CTA is essentially fused with the Democratic Party. The CTA donated \$8 million to a committee that funded Thurmond's campaign,<sup>37</sup> and tossed another million dollars at Gavin Newsom's campaign for governor.<sup>38</sup>

CTA leaders pushed for the passage of the Tentative Agreement, and they pitched it as a huge victory. Their limited perspective of what is possible, and their subservience to the Democratic Party, hampered the Los Angeles, Oakland, and Union City teacher strikes. CTA could have coordinated these and other strikes into a statewide fight for better education. But that would have meant mobilizing hundreds of thousands of teachers statewide, who could have very easily surged beyond what was an "acceptable" strike managed by CTA officials. Narrow, isolated strikes that are fought district-by-district are a losing strategy. If teachers want to harness their collective power they need to organize a broader strike, even one that could possibly be statewide. To do this they cannot look to CTA for organization or leadership.

## The Tentative Agreement

During the strike, the Board vowed to make \$20 million in budget cuts to student support programs and classified staff. On February 27, the planned midday action was to picket the School Board meeting and prevent the Board members from entering and making the cuts. When teachers successfully shut down their meeting, the School

<sup>37</sup> "Donations reach \$50 million in race for California state superintendent of schools," *EdSource*

Board rescheduled the meeting to March 1. The union leadership called on the strikers to shut down the School Board meeting once again. Almost 1,000 people – teachers, classified staff, and community members – gathered at the meeting site and blocked multiple entrances. Just before the meeting was scheduled to start, to the surprise of everyone on the picket lines, the union leaders sent a mass text to announce that a tentative contract agreement had been reached. OEA officials and CTA staffers then showed up and told everyone to call off the picket lines and allow the Board meeting to take place.

For most teachers, this felt like a bitter ending. The price of the TA (Tentative Agreement) was clear: abandon the picket lines and allow the budget cuts and layoffs of classified staff to happen. After much confusion, hundreds of teachers and some classified staff refused to leave. Those on the picket lines called friends and co-workers, asking them to come and support the picket lines. Others rushed around the building to coordinate and keep the many entrances blocked. About 300 people held the lines for the next few hours, blocking the entrances and ultimately preventing the Board from meeting. This turn of events shows just how quickly people’s consciousness can change during a strike, as they gain a sense of their collective strength and learn to rely on themselves and each other. Just a few weeks prior, it would have been impossible to imagine that so many teachers would ignore direct instructions from the union leadership to abandon the picket lines and decide what to do for themselves.

The union leadership proclaimed the TA as a “historic victory” and initially said there were no concessions. While the proposed contract was certainly an improvement over what District officials

had previously offered, it fell far short of what had been demanded by the union – and those demands were modest to begin with.

Instead of a reduction of class size maximums by four per class in high-needs schools and a reduction of two per class elsewhere, the TA settled for two in high-needs schools and one elsewhere, phased in over three years. Counselors’ caseloads were not reduced to 250 students as demanded, but rather decreased to 550 in July 2019 and to 500 in July 2020. (The District has the right to alter this ratio if lay-offs are called for due to budget reductions.) School nurses had demanded a reduction of their workload but instead were offered cash bonuses, meaning students would continue to receive inadequate medical services.

Instead of a 12% pay increase over three years, teachers got far less – 11% phased in over four years and weighted towards the end of the contract, plus a 3% bonus. This raise, having come so late, does not cover the rising cost of living the Bay Area, and thus does not address the teacher retention crisis, which was one of the main focuses of bargaining.

The agreement also settled for a Board resolution calling for a five-month “pause” in school closures. The brief pause did not prevent the School Board from continuing to make plans to close and consolidate schools. As soon as the School Board reconvened in August, it announced plans for another round of closures and consolidations.

## **Rep Council and Membership Response to the TA**

The OEA Rep Council met on Saturday, March 2 to vote on whether to recommend the contract to the membership, and this is where the question of the

organization of the strike showed itself. Many teachers were unaware of the specific demands. There had been no ongoing discussion with the membership about the realities of what was being negotiated. The picket lines had been in the hands of the membership while all other aspects were controlled by a small group of union officials and CTA staffers. Instead of providing daily updates on the negotiations, the union leadership had chosen to lift the spirits of the teachers at the noon-time rallies with pep talks about having the District “on the ropes” and an impending victory. The membership was not prepared for the compromises that had been made. In addition, many teachers expressed anger at the OEA leadership for its attempt to call off the picket lines at the School Board meeting, which would have allowed the School Board to pass budget cuts in programs and lay off classified staff.

The leadership defended the contract as a historic victory, with no major concessions. Most union reps knew that it fell far short of the demands and was certainly not the major victory that had been claimed. Therefore, many reps argued for rejecting the TA.

For some reps, who were opposed to the TA, the problem wasn't with the contract alone. They argued that the deciding factor should be the balance of forces. This meant that the real question was not the content of the TA, but whether or not teachers were ready to wage the longer strike it would take to win a better contract. They had already seen the signs of weakening picket lines, and had heard some teachers saying they could not continue striking and would go back to work on Monday. Some of the most active organizers feared that rejecting the TA and continuing the strike could lead to teachers crossing the picket lines,

causing bitter divisions that would be hard to overcome. While dissatisfied, they understood that they had to accept that teachers might have gone as far as they could go for now. This didn't mean they thought that the fight was over, but that the contract fight was just the first of many battles. The Rep Council advisory vote was close – 53 recommended a yes vote, 50 recommended a no vote, and two abstained. The final decision rested with the membership.

The official ratification vote was held at the general membership meeting on Sunday, March 3. This was the only full membership meeting since the new leadership took office. The Rep Council's demand that the TA be available 24 hours ahead of the vote was respected. Instead of people taking the proposed agreement home and studying it on their own, some reps proposed that people get together to discuss the specifics and decide what to do. As a result, a few cluster and school site leaders brought teachers together for a collective discussion of the TA. In one of the largest clusters, which had held regular meetings since December and had seen a high level of member participation during the strike, 100 members showed up to read and discuss the TA, including how to vote.

At the membership meeting, there were several hours of heated debate while teachers voted on the agreement. Like the vote in the Rep Council, a “Yes” vote for the contract did not necessarily mean approval of its terms. In fact, some advocates for a “Yes” vote voiced that the contract was disappointing and inadequate. Voting “Yes” didn't always indicate an approval of the contract; it sometimes meant that teachers felt that the membership was not ready to wage a longer strike at that time. Given the demoralization at some schools in the last days, there was good reason to be concerned.

The final vote was: 1,141 (58%) “Yes” and 832 (42%) “No.”

On Monday, the first day back to work, teachers at a few schools organized walk-ins. They gathered outside campus with students and parents in a show of unity and solidarity. When the bell rang for class to start, the students and teachers marched in together to their classes, chanting in unison. Although very few people felt that the new contract represented a huge victory, many returned to work with a sense of accomplishment and new-found solidarity. Ironically, at the same time, the School Board was meeting to make the cuts to classified staff and student programs that they had been prevented from making during the strike. It was clear that this strike was just one fight in a longer battle.

## **After the Strike**

Students, parents, and community members at several schools felt betrayed by the teachers accepting such a weak contract. This is an oversimplification of course, as many teachers wanted and expected much more, and were not happy with the result. Nevertheless, at some schools the strike created divisions between teachers, students, and families. Some students and families were angry that so few gains were made that related to improving students’ learning conditions, such as class sizes and nurses’ and counselors’ caseloads. To address these lingering sentiments, teachers will need to make an effort to repair and rebuild these relationships. That means taking the time to listen to parent and student concerns and actually being ready to act on them. When families are left out of the picture until the last moment, they will be much less likely to participate in future struggles alongside teachers.

It’s also important to note that after a strike falls short of its basic demands, it isn’t uncommon to experience a period of demoralization or reduced activity. Many teachers went back to their classrooms feeling that little had changed despite the efforts and sacrifices they made. They were back to the grind, facing the same day-to-day challenges they confronted the day before the strike began. There were also divisions between striking teachers and those who crossed the picket lines. On the other hand, some of the relationships built up during the strike continued. The post-strike period has also provided time for teachers to evaluate their experiences, reorient themselves, and discuss how to organize the fights ahead.

## **An Assessment of the Strike**

After the strike, many teachers raised questions about how the strike was led, and why it ended the way it did. There was considerable frustration with the top-down control of the strike by a handful of union officials, and in particular the influence of the CTA. The role of the CTA and the OEA leadership in the strike, however, was not simply a result of individual decisions and personalities. It was in line with the common functioning of most unions today. This is reflected in the perspective that most union members consider the union officials to be “the union.”

The concerns of union officials usually revolve around the day-to-day affairs of the union and relations with management. They accept the fundamental relationships of this society, which give the bosses the right to control the workplace. Almost all union contracts reflect this. So most union officials view their role as one of representing, but not engaging the workers. They see themselves as mediators between the bosses and the workers,



based on the rules established by the bosses. Often it is only at contract time that union officials see the need for the workers to be active participants in union affairs – to vote on the contract and possibly go on strike. This was certainly the case with the former OEA leadership.

The new OEA leadership came into office with the goal of changing many of the practices of the former union officials. They correctly assessed that the District wasn't going to change its stance and accept the pre-existing contract proposals, which meant that a strike was probably going to be necessary. In the months leading up to the strike, they began working towards "strike readiness." They drew from Jane McAlevey's work and the Labor Notes playbook and involved teachers in trainings with this specific purpose in mind. This consisted of having individual discussions with teachers about their willingness to strike. It also included their involvement in various pre-strike activities called "structure tests," such as signing petitions or holding informational pickets to assess the participation of union members. These efforts can be essential steps in preparing for a strike – in "taking the temperature" and actively engaging people. But one central component was missing: the involvement in real decision-making by the membership. For example, there was not a single membership meeting until the vote on the TA after the strike. The decision-making remained in the hands of a small number of OEA officials and CTA staffers.

By not challenging who was representing the union at the bargaining table, the new officials left bargaining in the hands of the former union officials and CTA. By not challenging the agreement to respect confidential bargaining, they denied the membership any real knowledge of what was going

on until a TA was proposed. The membership was not at all clear that confidential bargaining meant they were left out of the process. This concern was expressed when the Rep Council passed a motion for regular bargaining updates. The leadership accepted the motion, though they knew that the confidential bargaining agreement meant that they had no way to carry it out. While many teachers felt more involved and confident in the new union leadership, they had no say in the overall preparation and organization of the strike, and no say in what was happening at the bargaining table.

A number of things were not taken into consideration in preparing for the strike. A strike challenges the basic relationship of forces. The legal bonds of the contract no longer exist and the relationship is no longer a discussion around a table in a conference room. The contest of forces moves into the streets. The bosses still have their usual forces behind them – the politicians, the laws, the courts, and the police. Those on strike have the possibility of mobilizing much greater forces – forces well beyond those covered in a contract. That's where the power of the working class lies. But little was done in the strike preparation to realize this aspect. Instead, the leadership put their hopes in public rallies, positive media coverage, and the involvement of Democratic Party politicians. Not enough links were built with classified staff. And when the leadership called on teachers to stop picketing the Board from meeting to lay off classified staff, it must have left a very bitter taste for those classified staff who had supported the strike. While some efforts were made to have parent meetings, this did not take place evenly across the District. Limited and last-minute efforts were directed to win support in the broader community. While there was some outreach to other union

officials, there was little outreach to teachers in other districts or to other workers. The lack of outreach materials at rallies and marches was another sign that this was not on the leadership's radar. This kind of outreach to build support could have opened the possibility of engaging the active problem-solving abilities of hundreds more people to strengthen and expand the strike.

## **Could the Strike Have Been Different?**

Could the strike have had a different outcome? Could it have ended with a contract that won the union's pre-strike bargaining proposal? Could it have gone even further? Possibly, but certainly not unless it was organized differently.

So how could we imagine a different scenario? Leading up to the strike there could have been general membership meetings, which would have allowed all the teachers to participate – not just the reps, cluster leads, and picket captains. This would have been a place for an honest evaluation of the situation, an assessment of the forces arrayed against the teachers, and an understanding of what was really going on in bargaining. It would have provided a rationale and created support for a change in the composition of the representatives at the bargaining table. It also would have raised the question of providing real bargaining updates. Of course, this would have challenged the status quo. But that is the necessity of a successful strike.

The leadership overlooked a key component of McAlevey's analysis – understanding “the whole worker.” That means not just regarding teachers as people who exist only in the school setting. Teachers have a multitude of other connections – in their communities, in other organizations, and with families and friends. All these connections provide

potential resources that can be drawn on and possibly mobilized. The same is true with parents, whose connections don't solely rest through their children's schools. A real effort to involve the classified staff would have greatly strengthened the strike. Those with connections in the community, either organic or coming out of parent meetings at the schools, could have organized public meetings to discuss the situation in the schools and the goals of the strike. If successful, these meetings could have been ongoing, involving people ready to take some responsibility during and after the strike.

As the strike became more of a reality, some of the more active high school teachers, who had organized the earlier walkouts, discussed the need for actions that would draw attention to the upcoming strike. These teachers and others could have been organized to reach out beyond their schools and help lay the foundations for a broader and deeper fight to defend Oakland schools. It might have also been possible to actively engage teachers in other districts who face similar problems, some of whom were facing contract fights, too.

Teachers, equipped with good outreach materials that explained the strike issues, could have gone to other workplaces in the Bay Area with parents, community members, friends and neighbors to involve the larger community in the strike. It would also have made it much easier to connect with the general public who saw the teacher marches and rallies. For example, teachers and their supporters could have handed out leaflets and talked with people at BART stations to make their struggle more visible and recruit more support.

Given the popularity and support for the recent teachers strikes across the country, the

involvement of broader forces was more possible than in previous years. There was a strong identification with teachers' struggles because of the value people place on education and the commonality of the attacks we all face.

Strikes today, especially in the public sector, cannot be won with a reliance on only those who are directly impacted. There are too many forces arrayed against them. But the centrality of education, like other public services, has an impact on many people. Therefore, those who are connected or supportive in any way need to be involved. That means there have to be lines of communication established, and places where discussions can take place and decisions can be made that cohere all those involved into a powerful force. That depends not just on the union leadership, but on the overall level of organization and involvement of the membership.

### **A Different Kind of Organization?**

Ordinary union structures maintain a formal, legalistic relationship with management, while a strike requires different forms of organization. The aim of a strike should be to fully engage the entire membership and others ready to join the fight in a democratic, participatory struggle organized from the ground up. Organizing at the school sites prior to a strike is essential, and that means including teachers, staff, families, and students where possible. It can be expected that participation in advance of a strike won't be as great as when the strike is imminent or underway. However, a wide rank-and-file teachers network created in advance could have provided regular and clear lines of communication between different schools. A network of this sort would have put members in a position to decide how to run their own strike from day to

day. Some teachers took the first step in establishing lines of communication by creating a rank-and-file WhatsApp group, but this didn't result in a broad coordination.

A broader rank-and-file network would have enabled teachers to take the temperature and measure the overall levels of participation on the picket lines each day of the strike. This information was vital to evaluating the strength of the strike and deciding on upcoming actions. Although this information was shared at daily meetings with picket captains and cluster leads, the meetings were limited to debriefing sessions that provided information to the union leadership. There was no mechanism to allow the picket captains and the cluster leads to evaluate the situation and propose next steps.

What if the picket captains had been able to share information, assessments, and proposals at regular site meetings open to teachers, staff, students, families, and other active supporters of the strike? This could have greatly strengthened the strike and would have also laid the basis for maintaining organization after the strike. These site meetings would have allowed for much fuller and more inclusive discussions and decision-making by everyone who participated in the strike.



Marching to Go Public Schools offices

Teachers, staff, students and families could have received regular bargaining updates and voiced their opinions on proposals at the bargaining table. This would have allowed for a real collective participation and decision-making process, and facilitated the coordination of the strike and strike-related actions. And it would have given real meaning to the popular chant “Whose schools? Our schools!” that was heard at the midday rallies.

We can imagine many possibilities. Maybe striking teachers could have organized regional cluster assemblies or city-wide general assemblies, depending on the length and strength of the strike. The point remains that structures need to be developed that maximize the participation and decision-making of everyone involved in the strike.

That being said, despite its limitations, the strike was not a defeat. Oakland teachers didn’t win a good contract, but they activated and organized their ranks, won community support, and learned a lot. The strike also empowered new layers of activists within the schools and the community, and it offered an opportunity for teachers, staff, parents, and students to begin building a network that is connected across multiple schools in Oakland. This is a good foundation to build on as the fight continues.

Each strike, each struggle, is a learning experience – an exercise in understanding our organized power as well as the forces arrayed against us.



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