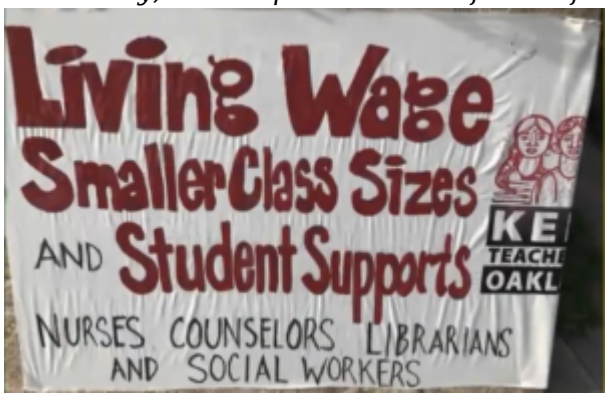
Oakland teachers' strike: Balance sheet, lessons, and what next?

written by Jack Gerson | March 8, 2019

Editor's note: The Oakland teachers' strike was arguably a watershed in resistance to neoliberal education reforms. In one regard Oakland teachers' demands echo those in this year's teacher strike wave, a growing social movement led by teachers, with massive support of parents and community, to save public schools from reforms pushed by both Democrats and Republicans.



Yet Press briefings by the Oakland Education Association (OEA) and a remarkable website created by a community supporter, show an extraordinary shift: an explicit yet seamless fusion of attention to social oppression, race and gender, with labor's mission to defend the dignity of work and workers. "It's really, really exciting – a movement that is connecting the dots" observed Pauline Lipman, whose research on the racial significance of neoliberal school reform in Chicago helped inform the Chicago Teachers Union 2012 program, the widely-adopted template for teacher union demands, "The schools Chicago students deserve."

In this article, Jack Gerson, retired Oakland teacher and former executive board and bargaining team member, analyzes what occurred and why in the Oakland strike.

On Friday March 1, 2019 the bargaining teams of the Oakland school district (OUSD) and the Oakland teachers union (OEA) reached a tentative agreement that received a mixed reception by OEA members. Yesterday (March 3), after several hours of heated debate, OEA members voted to ratify the agreement, 1141 to 832, or 58% for, 42% against. That's an unusually big "no" vote on a contract recommended by a union leadership which had just organized a spirited strike that shut down Oakland schools for seven school days. At cluster meetings and at OEA's Representative Council (delegate assembly) on Saturday (March 2), bitter accusations were made by teachers who thought the agreement was far less than the union could win by continuing to strike.

Why this division? Despite the union leadership hailing the agreement as "historic", it is far from that. There were several complaints:

OEA had demanded no school closures (earlier this year, OUSD announced plans to close 15 schools and consolidate nine others). The OEA leadership said this was a critical demand. But in the tentative agreement, they settled for a 5 month "pause" in school closures. That's not worth much: the pause will end at the beginning of August, in time for OUSD to close schools before next school year starts. It will be much harder to fight those school closures in the summer, with teachers and students on vacation, than it is right now during the strike. And if the schools are closed, we can

expect the available school properties to be disposed of: some to charter schools, some to real estate speculators who will drive housing costs still higher — more teachers leaving Oakland, more homelessness. Many teachers spoke out against the "pause."

School nurses said that their overwhelming need was for OUSD to lower their workload and hire more nurses. But the tentative agreement provided no change in nurses' workload – just cash bonuses which the nurses had repeatedly told the union's bargaining team they didn't want to settle. Several nurses told the Saturday meetings that "We were thrown under the bus."

OEA had demanded a reduction of maximum counselor workload to 250 students (From the current 600). But they agreed to 550 next year and 500 the following year. Every little bit helps, but this will only help a little bit.

OEA had demanded a reduction of class size maximums by 4 per class in high needs schools (about half of Oakland schools) and by 2 elsewhere. But in the tentative agreement, they settled for 2 in high-needs schools and 1 elsewhere, phased in over three years — better than nothing, but far less than what's needed, as many teachers said.

OEA had demanded a 12% pay increase over three years: 3% retroactive to the start of the 2017-8 school year, another 4% retroactive to the start of the 2018-9 school year, and another 5% for the 2019-20 school year. But they agreed to 11% over four plus years, starting January 1, 2019. And since the last 2.5% increase won't take effect until the last day of year 4, it's essentially an increase for the following year – so this is 11% over five years, or 2.2% per year, well below the cost of living increases. The original demands were meager enough: Oakland teachers are the lowest paid in Alameda County, an area where housing costs and overall cost of living are among the highest in the country. The proposed increases in the tentative agreement will be less than inflation, which will do nothing to help young teachers to make ends meet, and so the exodus of teachers out of Oakland will continue.

OEA had made solidarity with other school worker unions a main theme. Indeed, on Friday OEA called for a picket with community members and SEIU Local 1021 (representing OUSD classified workers) to block the school board from meeting and adopting a budget which would cut over 140 jobs, mainly of SEIU members. But at about 2pm, OEA President Keith Brown told the pickets "We have a TA! We Won!" and urged them to disperse. The optics of this are very bad and were not lost on SEIU members. One wrote on Facebook: "As a SEIU member who has been picketing in the rain or shine for the past seven strike days, I feel betrayed. I feel used… I thought our collective goal Friday was to shut down the Board Meeting."

Fortunately, several hundred OEA members ignored the leadership's request and stayed to picket with SEIU and community until after 6pm, when the school board meeting was cancelled. It's critical to not let the school board play divide and conquer, pretending that they have to cut SEIU workers and student support programs to pay for the OEA contract. The attempt to disperse the pickets on Friday played into the school board's hands. That needs to be corrected. It's important that OEA leadership make clear that it unambiguously stands with all OUSD workers and stands fully in solidarity and support with them. Those cuts need not happen: much of the money is already there, and more can be found by cutting down on OUSD's outrageous shoveling of revenue to private contracts and to redundant and overpaid top administrators.

On Monday, March 4, hundreds of students and several teachers called in sick to protest at an emergency school board meeting called during school hours to try to minimize student and school worker presence. Despite impassioned speeches from scores of students and several teachers and other school workers, and over the protest of virtually all of those present, the school board voted to

make $22 million in cuts: to school libraries; to restorative justice programs; to the Asian Pacific Islander support program; to the foster youth program; and to lay off well over 100 classified school workers.

On balance: It's important to acknowledge that Keith Brown and his team were able to lead a spirited strike supported and carried out by over 90% of OEA members. In contrast, OEA's punishing 27-day strike in 1996 was beset by divisions within the union and within the community, as some charged that it deprived black students of essential schooling. None of that this time – the union was unified throughout the strike, and it had substantial support from students, parents, and community.

And it's not helpful to characterize the contract as "a sellout", nor to say that the bargaining team or the officers are "sellouts." I believe them when they say that they're convinced that this was the best deal that could be had at this time. I believe them, but I don't agree with them. Why not?

First, I think that the leadership was heavily influenced by their state parent, the California Teacher Association (CTA). CTA is overly legalistic and cautious, and it is closely tied to the state Democratic Party. Under CTA's influence, the leadership team was far less transparent during the strike than it should have been. Decisions were made by a small group consisting largely of OEA's officers and CTA staffers, with some union executive board members telling me that even the executive board was out of the loop. One lesson is more transparency is needed, and especially needed is an elected strike committee to work directly with the officers, the executive board and, as often as possible, Rep Council and picket captains.

Second, and related, I think that there was a reluctance to aggressively confront corporate targets physically with militant actions. To overcome the intransigence of the corporate-funded and controlled school board, it's necessary to convince corporate Oakland that the union is prepared to see that there's no business as usual. Hesitancy to do that was evident in the reluctance of the OEA leadership to vigorously pursue a proposal to rally and picket at the Port of Oakland, which could and should have occurred several days ago and would have had the support of dockworkers (ILWU Local 34 had already voted its support). Instead, CTA staff and OEA officers expressed fears that the union would be legally liable if it picketed at the Port (it wouldn't: the park and roads at the port are public property, picketing there is legal and that right has been exercised numerous times, including more than once by OEA). Finally, last Thursday (February 28), Rep Council voted overwhelmingly to picket at the Port on March 5 (tomorrow). It's no accident that OUSD improved its offer and rushed to settle when they did: one big reason was to preempt the port action. Had OEA not settled on Friday, and especially if it followed the Port action with militant rallies and sit-ins aimed at the big real estate and financial interests in downtown Oakland, I think that the corporate masters would have told state and city politicians to cough up some money, and told their school board puppets to settle up.

The union leadership repeatedly credited OEA's militant and spirited picket lines and mass rallies with what they proclaim as an historic win. But then they turned around and said that the meager tentative agreement is "the best that can be won at this time" because, they claimed, support was beginning to ebb. I saw little evidence of that: Thousands of teachers turned out to picket, march and rally on rainy days all week. I think that there's another reason: The union leadership is for the most part close to liberal Democrats like state superintendent of schools Tony Thurmond, who stepped in late this week to mediate the dispute and broker the deal. Thurmond and other Democrats represent corporate interests and the state, both of which wanted an end to this disruptive strike. I am sure that they pressed the OEA leadership directly as well as indirectly (through their influence with community activists and with CTA, OEA's statewide parent union).

It's important to move forward now: to do what wasn't done during the strike – a complete end to

the school closures; a full moratorium on charter school growth; restore all the cut programs and all the jobs that were cut; take the spirit that dominated the strike and rekindle it into a militant movement that confronts corporate Oakland – at the Port, in the City Center, at all the seats of corporate power. Confront them, and demand that the priorities be set straight: Adequate funding for quality public education and for essential social services, not for privatization and corporate profit.

[Editor's note: Kitty Kelly Epstein responds to Jack Gerson's analysis here.]