

NOTES ON OAKLAND TEACHERS STRIKE

By Peter Shapiro

1. The Oakland Education Association (OEA) demands: 12% pay hike over 3 years, more support staff (nurses, counselors, speech pathologists & resource specialists), smaller classes & no more school closures.

2. The Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) teachers are so badly paid that many can't afford to live here. Class size is also an issue. As a result, teacher turnover is extremely high—500 out of 3000 left the district last year. This is a sore spot with students, who have several organized one-day sympathy strikes in recent weeks. They're sick of seeing good teachers leave.



3. District has a lot of high needs kids—special ed, kids in foster care, immigrant kids who are still learning English (“newcomers”). Proliferation of charter schools (which enroll a far smaller proportion of these kids) has increased the burden on regular schools. More support staff badly needed, for the kids and their teachers.

4. District has closed 18 “underutilized” schools since 2004 and plans to close 24 more. Their sites are often taken over by charter schools, which impose a huge financial drain on the district---not only are they able to cherry pick their students (special needs kids are seriously underrepresented), but they are free of the “legacy costs” (retiree health benefits and pensions) which suck up much of the district’s revenue. School funding is based on attendance, so the more kids are in charter schools, the less money the regular ones get. (Postal workers know all about this.)

5. Current school board makeup reflects big campaign contributions for charter school industry, and the board has negotiated sweetheart deals with charter school chains like KIPP, giving up school district property a song and costing the district hundreds of thousands of dollars in state revenue.

6. District claims to be hurting financially, since most of its funding comes from Sacramento and there are some crippling restrictions on how it can be spent. (For instance, state law does not permit district to reject charter school applications for financial reasons and basing funding on attendance rather than enrollment means schools that need more resources to deal with at-risk students get cuts instead.) But OUSD administration is notoriously top-heavy, spends tons of money on outside consultants and has negotiated lousy deals with charter school entrepreneurs.

7. The problem lies in Sacramento no less than the district. CA used to have one of the best-funded public school systems in the country. Since Prop 13; passed in 1978, it's dropped to 44th. One thing the union and the school board agree on is the need to pass the initiative on next year's ballot eliminating the “corporate tax loophole” in Prop 13, which has drastically shifted the property tax burden from businesses onto homeowners. Some of the state's

wealthiest businesses are paying the same amount in property taxes that they paid forty years ago.

8. At the national level, we've seen a concerted, well-funded attack on public education, spearheaded by corporate "reformers" like Bill Gates, Michael Bloomberg, and the Walton Family Foundation (they own WalMart) who have pushed charter schools as the answer to everything that ails public education. Some of this is ideological ("give parents a choice!") and much of it is anti-union, since teacher's unions, like other public employees, are seen as the last stronghold of organized labor. The Chronicle recently ran an opinion piece from the Hoover Institute calling for elimination of teacher tenure as the best way to save our public schools.

9. Since last spring there has been a wave of teacher strikes across the country. It began in right-to-work "red states" like West Virginia and Arizona where teachers unions are weak and teachers pretty much self-organized through Facebook, twitter, etc. Without the ability to bargain with local school boards, they focused their demands on their GOP-dominated state legislatures and won major concessions.

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10. United Teachers of Los Angeles struck for six days last month around the same demands as the OEA, and won, thanks in part to a huge show of support from parents, teachers, and the community. There were daily noon rallies at different spots around the city and mass picket at each school where supporters often outnumbered strikers. The OEA is utilizing the same playbook and will need the same kind of support for it to work.

