

# Lessons of the Strike

**The OEA Membership and Student/Community Support  
Made Our Strike Strong**

**We Need to Build a New Leadership and Fight for More Union  
Democracy in the OEA**

**Leadership Plus Union Democracy is the Key to Winning**

The most important thing we can do over the next few days and weeks is draw the correct conclusions from our strike. It is the lessons we learn and apply now that can take us much further in building the mass movement to defend public education and revitalizing the labor movement. The strike wave of teachers is the most important force today in the defense of public education and the mass movement against Donald Trump. Our movement must recognize its own independent power.

**EON/BAMN Meeting**

**Friday, Mar. 15, 4:00 PM**

Oakland Tech H.S., Room 250

4351 Broadway (btwn. 42nd + 45th St.)

Teachers must show that we are willing to lead people in California in a winning fight to force politicians to spend some of the \$21 billion surplus on public education now. We have to force Newsom to break with Jerry Brown's policy of accumulating billions in a so called "Rainy Day Fund" in order to send a message to a few high-tech billionaires and corporations that there is no way their taxes could possibly ever be raised. The rainy day is here every day for the young people of California, as long as the public schools are impoverished and teachers and students are kept in a needless and ongoing crisis in the richest state in the country. Everyone knows there is plenty of money.

The issue is not economic but political. We must return to the days of the California Master Plan for Education of the 1960's and 70's when California's political leadership understood that a commitment to a policy of equal, quality, public education for all was the key to California's future. California is now sitting on a huge amount of money that could solve the problems of public education, but it is not spending it. The students and community are overwhelmingly behind this fight. People are sick of schools being closed and the longstanding and growing problems of inequality in California's schools which is the fault of the political decisions to deny public education the funding it desperately needs for many years. Teachers are striking because of their understanding that we must change this

We must build a leadership based on a shared understanding and willingness to act on that understanding. Leaders for this movement developed rapidly in the course of this strike. We must fight to establish and defend norms of union democracy that puts a strike under the control of these leaders. We must demand an elected bargaining team which makes daily reports to the Reps and Picket Captains. We need an elected Strike Committee that is accountable to rank and file members in carrying out the day to day actions of the strike. We have the strength to be able to finally defeat the attacks on public education and especially on the Latina/o, immigrant, and black communities, but we must ensure that the leaders who are prepared to fight to win have the information they need and the ability to democratically determine the decisions of the Bargaining Team and Strike Committee in order for that fight to win a decisive victory.

## **Lesson One: Leadership is Key**

**OEA members at the sites are right to be angry at the huge discrepancy between the power of the strike and how little we ended up winning.** Our strike was strong enough to win all our demands and prevent the School Board from voting for \$20 million worth of cuts. We are right to feel the community is unwaveringly behind us. The Tentative Agreement (TA) that was ultimately ratified should never have been brought to the membership. There should be no confusion; the OEA rank and file members were strong and growing stronger. The problem was with the top OEA/CTA

leadership and their insistence that the strike be contained within the limits that were dictated by Tony Thurmond and the Democratic Party politicians. They moved to shut down the strike and take a contract that was far inferior to what we could and should have won at the very moment when the strike was clearly winning and leading all of Oakland. To prevent this shut-down of the strike we needed more union democracy and accountability by the top OEA leadership and Bargaining Team to OEA members, Reps, and Picket Captains.

The CTA staffers directed the strike, with the willing acquiescence of President Keith Brown and Vice President Armendariz. The President and Vice President, along with the CTA “staffers,” were terrified of an independent mass movement spearheaded by teachers who were leading all of Oakland in the fight for public education and Oakland’s youth.

They panicked, not because of any weakness in the strike, but because of its strength.

New leaders, teachers and students, were developing so rapidly, more every day, in the red-hot arena of the strike. The OEA leadership chose to shut things down, rather than risk losing authority to the bolder, more dynamic leaders who were coming forward. Before the strike began, if you asked members if they would fill the Rep Council meeting to tell elected Reps to defy their own OEA President and Bargaining Team and reject the Tentative Agreement – many would have said “NO,”; they would not have seen themselves doing that. Members on the picket lines and in the Rep Council had begun to assert their own understanding, whether they had official titles or not. Teachers were becoming more confident as the strike kept growing stronger with all of Oakland behind us. The strike was about more than a contract, it was a movement with the backing of the Latina/o, immigrant, and black communities. It was clear that we could win a decisive victory that far exceeded what any politician was prepared to sanction.

In the only Rep Council meeting that was held during the strike (a Special Rep Council on Thursday, February 28<sup>th</sup> the day before the TA was announced) Reps spent the majority of the meeting demanding more information on bargaining – even though neither Keith Brown nor any Bargaining Team members attended, and answers were non-existent. Reps voted to continue building for the Port of Oakland shutdown, and passed EON/BAMN’s resolution demanding removal of the State School Trustee. The EON/BAMN resolution calling for daily reports to Rep Council from the President and Bargaining Team and a vote before any demand was dropped did not pass. However, it was clear that there was a rapidly growing sense by the Reps that in order for the strike to win what it could - it was imperative that they assert their own control over and against the President, CTA, and Bargaining Team.

From the point of view of the President and CTA, this meant that it was imperative to reach a TA before the next Rep Council meeting, which was scheduled for Monday, March 4, only four days away. It is imperative now that we draw these lessons and take over leadership of the union so that the power that was expressed in the strike is never again allowed to be intentionally dissipated.

## **An Illustrative Story**

In fact, the top OEA and CTA leadership would have liked to have called the strike off even sooner. On Sunday, February 4<sup>th</sup>, two days into an unprecedentedly strong strike, President Brown, Vice President Armendariz and the CTA staff revealed in a morning OEA Executive Board meeting that they had invited Tony Thurmond to act as the OEA’s mediator in Bargaining. Opposition to this was led by OEA Secretary Mark Airgood and Executive Board member Tania Kappner, both EON/BAMN members who pointed out that Thurmond is one of the politicians responsible for the policies that have led to the crisis in public education in California and is an enemy of the strike. Airgood and Kappner emphasized that we should foster no illusions in him but instead rely on the mass power the strike was wielding.

Within hours of the majority decision to bring in Thurmond, in the early afternoon of the same day, the unelected OEA “Organizing Committee” announced that the planned shutdown of the Port of Oakland, was being cancelled at the behest of “leadership.” And, within minutes after that, it was announced that OEA Leadership was calling off afternoon picketing at the school sites. Such was the preparation being made for the evening press conference at the OEA Office to announce Tony Thurmond’s arrival. Thurmond’s arrival was clearly accompanied by a move to shut down the most independent and important actions of the strike.

EON/BAMN caucus members, Secretary Mark Airgood, along with Executive Board member Tania Kappner, and East Oakland Pride Site Rep Adi Hoag organized OEA members as well as students to go to the OEA office

immediately to demand that the message calling off pickets be rescinded and the Port action continued. After Brown and a CTA representative claimed for the next two hours (as EON/BAMN members, students and other teachers remained at the office demanding to see things fixed) that the cancelation of pickets had been a mistake but failed to send out a correction, Vice President Armendariz came into the office and stated categorically that in fact there had been no mistake and he took complete responsibility for calling off the pickets and intended to maintain that policy.

Clearly the plan was to bring Thurmond in and end the strike by Monday or Tuesday. However, the fact that members were alerted and made an immediate fight forced Armendariz, Brown and the CTA to back off. In their press conference that evening the focus was taken off Thurmond, and by the next day they were using the words “strong picket lines” in every other sentence. The lesson of this is that membership action, even that of a relatively small number of members, who are organized and bold in demanding a change of policy can carry the day. Full information and union democracy are key. The strike went on, grew even stronger, and maintained the possibility of winning for several more days because of this intervention.

## **Lesson Two: We must fight for union democracy. We need an elected strike committee and Bargaining Team. Contract ratification votes should be open – not by secret ballot.**

A strike calls for discipline and unity on the basis of union democracy. An elected bargaining team and an elected strike committee is key to winning a strike. Full information to members can only be guaranteed if the leadership of the strike is held strictly accountable to the membership. Otherwise they end up serving the politicians rather than members and the community. When a leadership hides information rather than publicizing it to members, when it circumvents elected representatives rather than putting them in control of the strike, action by members is necessary.

Over the last week of bargaining, the OEA Bargaining Team met with the District behind closed doors and members knew next to nothing at all about what was going on. There was growing concern among teachers on the line because everyone knew that if the Team were fighting for our demands they would have something to say. Members knew something was wrong. We now see what it was. The contract had been cobbled together to try to fool us. What the Bargaining Team was doing was trying to figure out how to package the OUSD Administration’s position in a way that could be sold to OEA members. They couldn’t report on that, so we got platitudes instead.

There was no reason to send the weak TA to the membership other than fear and the unwillingness of the CTA to really fight to overturn the policy of the Democratic Party majority politicians in California who have starved public education for decades. In West Virginia and Oklahoma, teachers forced majority Republican legislatures to increase funding for public education, but in California we are told we must work within the local school budget. We need a union leadership who breaks with this policy of making ourselves subordinate to Democratic Party policy.

Once a TA is sent, it sends the message to the membership that the Bargaining Team plans to do no better. It is a high hill to climb to defeat a TA, especially when there is secret ballot voting, in which members are not held accountable to one another. The OEA Representative Council was split on the TA, narrowly passing a recommendation for it by a vote of 53 to 50. The membership approved the TA by a narrow majority of 58% to 42%. If the vote on the TA had been taken as an open vote in the Paramount Theatre Auditorium, there is little doubt that it would have been defeated. The line of speakers against the TA was always three times as long as the line for it. The leaders coming forward stop the bad TA needed to have norms of union democracy established in order carry the day. We need open voting on contract ratification. A strike gains its strength from unity in action. It is a mass movement. Everyone must be accountable to everyone else at every stage of decision making. Everyone must stand and take their position publicly. This keeps the individuals accountable to the whole.

We must strengthen union democracy now, before the next strike. We need full information at every stage of bargaining with the right of an elected strike committee to vote down any attempt to drop our demands! We must demand there be no secret bargaining and no marathon bargaining; these are the most usual means to rush to undercut the strike. Members and the community need to know what we are fighting for at every stage.

## **Lesson Three: It is crucial that students play a central and independent role in the strike in order to keep the teachers and union accountable.**

The biggest lie and excuse by the OEA's top leadership, the OEA Bargaining Team and their apologists was that students and the community were wavering and we would be doing them a favor to end their hardship and sacrifice by settling quickly, and for too little. Virtually every member on the line knows this flies in the face of the reality we were seeing every day with 96% of students staying out of school, and fewer coming every day. The definition of a bad leadership is one who is trying to demoralize its own membership. Of course, those who want to kill the strike, were using these excuses in an utterly cynical way, seeking to blame the students and community to excuse ending the strike with far too little won. Settle for less, at the very moment we as a union have the most authority we have ever had in the fight to reverse the attacks on public education, at a moment when the school board is completely exposed for the enemies of students and teachers that they are. This is ludicrous on its face.

But, despite the evidence of their own senses, teachers are particularly susceptible to these lies. Even when we are leading the whole city and nation, there is too much self-doubt and second guessing of ourselves. Especially when a majority of our union leadership is set on demoralization. The active participation of students acting independently, standing with the teachers but also for themselves, is crucial to keeping teachers battling doubt and staying accountable to our own best selves. It is a rule of where we find ourselves in history; we must be our own heroes. Students acting as their own heroes are an inspiration to teachers to stand strong and do the same.

#### **Lesson Four: The most important thing about our strike was its strength.**

The fact that the Oakland strike happened and was so strong, even despite it winning such a mediocre outcome, is of enormous importance, not just for Oakland, but for the part it plays in building the movement of teachers nationally to take control of public education. Rank and file teachers did great, in many cases better than they ever thought they could. This is an experience that cannot be forgotten.

We proved that objectively we have the power to win a decisive victory for public education that can shift the balance of power back toward teachers and students, and away from the enemies of public education. The fact that teachers had a leadership that was committed to NOT winning, who was afraid of the power of the strike and moved to contain and shut it down, does not change the experience that teachers and students had, as long as we do not draw the wrong conclusions. In reality, the teachers' struggle under Trump is the most important form of mass resistance to Trump and his entire vision of America. We must build a leadership that will lead the struggle forward.

#### **Lesson Five: We must not let the politicians constrain what we win. Our demands are key!**

The OEA President and CTA leadership were compelled because of their fear of the power of the membership to rush to hand the power of the strike back to Tony Thurmond and the Democrats. We didn't have to do that. We need a leadership that won't collapse at the crucial moment. We need to fight until the state of California provides a massive increase in funding for public education in California. We can force Newsom to send some of California's \$21 billion budget surplus to the Oakland schools. That Oakland schools are paying off a debt to the state of California is completely ludicrous. We reject any suggestion that the lack of money is the problem.

We can stop the attacks on public education that have gone on for the last 35 years. We can stop school closings and charters. We can defend special education and win a massive increase in support staff. Charters have had explosive growth in California under a Democratic Party majority state government. We must see our task as building a mass civil rights movement for public education. The most important part of doing that now is to have a correct evaluation of the strike and act on the lessons. The key lesson is that we are beginning to realize and understand and use our own strength as a mass movement. We need a new leadership who is proud of this and will use not dissipate the power of our movement. We cannot let the Democrats use these struggles to build movements that don't move. The fact that the Oakland strike happened and it was so strong is of enormous importance, not just for Oakland, but for the part it plays in building the movement of teachers nationally to take control of public education.

#### **Lesson Six: We must build a new leadership and fight for more union democracy.**

The EON/BAMN caucus is committed to building a leadership and fighting for union democracy. EON/BAMN combines teachers and students to fight not only in the OEA, but in the teachers' unions statewide and nationally to revitalize the union movement and put it in the lead of a mass civil rights movement for public education and equality.

Our goal is to put an end once and for all to the attacks on the Latina/o, immigrant and black communities that have been waged for the last 35 years. We work with everyone and any organization committed to building an independent, mass, democratic movement for public education. Join EON/BAMN

**Equal Opportunity Now/By Any Means Necessary Caucus (EON/BAMN)**

**Mark Airgood (OEA Secretary), Tania Kappner (OEA Exec. Board),**

**Adi Hoag (East Oakland Pride Site Rep) 3/09/2019**