

A Fighting Plan To Win the Schools and Communities We Deserve

We — the workers, students, and parents of Oakland and the Bay Area — are at a critical juncture in our movement to defend the public resources that are vital to the health of our communities. The interests of the billionaire class are clear: they are unrelenting in their quest to turn a profit on our public schools, our public port, and more. This all despite having gone through a pandemic where promises were made to prioritize children coming out of it. The billionaires will continue to privatize and gentrify what little we have left, decimating the health of our communities by destroying access to public education, affordable housing, and decent-paying jobs.

But we seek to do more than stand in the way of the encroachment of privatization by charter school operators and property developers on our public school lands and port. Stopping the closures is a bare minimum. We need to also fight for fully-funded public schools and resources: schools that build and sustain our communities in the face of many societal pressures. To do that, we must concretely define what conditions are necessary for high-quality education for all. (OEA once had such a vision—including a maximum class size of 15, far more counselors and prep time—but it has disappeared from view.) How can we fight for “schools students deserve” if we don’t specifically define what we know is needed, based on educational research and our professional experience? Defining those conditions will make clear that high-quality, equitable education for all cannot be achieved without a major redistribution of corporate wealth to fund public education.

We also need much more beyond schools: fully funded communities, quality jobs for all, solutions for our climate crisis, and so much more. To achieve all of this we need to forge a fighting movement of rank and file workers and community members who are willing to act collectively and militantly on a mass scale to win these demands while also defending public spaces.

These are major goals to win that will take serious power to do so. But we are capable of this. We are the workers and community members of the Bay Area that make this region run. If we are able to unify solidly behind these goals and with a clear fighting strategy we can achieve them.

This is why we, a group of Oakland educators called the Rank and File Caucus, have worked hard to pull the SLAP coalition (Schools and Labor Against Privatization) together, which was the initial driving force behind this April 29th strike and port shutdown. We are currently working mostly where we are based, inside OUSD and the Oakland teacher union, OEA. But we recognize that to win what we need we must unify on a much broader basis and this is what we lay out next.

We will need to work on multiple social levels with 3 different coalitions tied to each level. We’ll explain how we see this work from our perspective as a rank and file caucus of OEA members.

You will need to relate to it from your own positions in society, whether you are a worker in education, a worker in another sector, a student, a parent, etc.

The First Coalition: Our Work In OUSD

On the first level we (in OEA) need to help build an OUSD-wide coalition with a few goals. You could do this same work in San Francisco Unified or Richmond/WCC schools.

First, in OUSD we must build the OEA leadership we need. Our current leadership is top-down, anti-democratic, and not a fighting leadership. It has led to weakened conditions for staff, students, and families and is a major reason we are vulnerable to school closures.

Second, we need to build wider unity with SEIU and AFSCME workers and their unions. We have seen in recent strikes in Chicago, Minneapolis, and Sacramento how many more union locals are doing cross-union strikes that bring much more power to bear. And crucially we need to start undermining the unequal work conditions between classified and certificated workers.

Third, we need to unite closer with parents and students to build unity and power with them. We need to support both forming stable parent and student unions that are democratic and militant. They should not be led by non-profits (but instead independent parent and student run organizations with them having full democratic power over decisions. (Non-profits can be important allies but are fundamentally limited by foundation funding and almost always staff-led and dominated.)

Fourth, we need to figure out a healthy relationship with elections and electoral politics. This holds true for all the coalitions and work we engage with. We absolutely should express our growing power in elections and win positions in elected office. But there are crucial limits to this work. Too often, organizations endorse unqualified candidates because they think it's better to have someone they hope will ally with them than nobody at all under the idea of "not letting the perfect be the enemy of good." This is a recipe for disaster and let down that leads to pessimism and confusion amongst people (case in point is Sam Davis in OUSD who was supported by OEA but then voted for school closures). We should only endorse and organize for tried and tested candidates that are dependable, movement-accountable, and actually integrated into movements as active organizers. These high standards are important and mean that we will not run candidates in many elections, especially at first. Most of our candidates will emerge directly from our organizing campaigns. It almost should go without saying that these candidates will not run as Democrats, because the Democratic Party will never accept them. Also crucial is that beyond the elections these candidates need to be integrated into movements with accountability to the movement and coalitions making the decisions on how they will vote on key issues. In return, the movements and coalitions will defend them against the many attacks that will come at our elected officials.

Fifth, we will need to fight to keep our coworkers, especially the organizers who will be targeted for their activism, in their jobs. We will face attacks from management for this work. And with

the ongoing dysfunction in OUSD it's hard to stay in these jobs. We will need to commit to defending ourselves so we don't lose our best organizers and our coworkers see what it means to fight for each other. This means we'll need to protect each other from administrative harassment in all forms, support each other in our daily work, build community amongst ourselves, make sure we know important info, such as how to maximize our retirement funds and use the salary columns to increase our pay, and much more.

To hold all this together we have formed a caucus of committed organizers with deep (and ever deepening) political alignment to work through the many different questions and obstacles that come up in this organizing. We will need similar caucuses in other unions and locals to do the work and keep it on the right strategic path.

This summarizes the work we, as OEA members, need to do and intend to do in OUSD. This work needs to be recreated in every school district.

The Second Coalition: Our Work Across Bay Area Districts

Beyond our individual districts we need to unite into a second coalition of cross-Bay Area education union locals and parent and student unions. This raises the need for cross-district solidarity. We see how OUSD and WCCUSD (Richmond schools) are both facing attacks from FCMAT and the State of California. We will need to leverage unified campaigns against these and other attacks and to fight for the schools we deserve, all the way up to cross-district strikes. This will help shake out of the powers that be all the money and school conditions we need. As always these wider alliances need to be democratic and bottom up. Currently, various CTA leaderships in urban districts have formed a coalition called CACS that really only consists of the officers and presidents from these unions. As such they have done nothing in the face of many statewide attacks and issues. We need to bring rank-and-file workers, parents, and students together to develop connections, analysis, and plans directly. Only that will lead to the unity we need to truly wage an integrated and militant struggle.

The prime example of this being successful is the West Virginia strike of 2018 when a statewide coalition of ALL education workers led a strike that shutdown every district in WV. They even rejected a sell out deal from their leadership who tried negotiating on their behalf and continued the strike. In return, they won a wage increase for EVERY SINGLE state employee and stopped all the proposed attacks on them (health care takeaways, etc.). This is the power and change possible in a bottom-up, militant statewide coalition. We propose starting with Bay Area locals as a manageable first step but certainly need to aim California-wide.

The Third Coalition: Unite Across Bay Area Locals

Lastly, we need to unite into a 3rd level of coalitions uniting all the union locals of Oakland. We see the need for this with the attacks on the Port and ILWU needing to unify with OEA and the school community for mutual defense. This coalition needs to take back control over our City

and make it work for working people. Obviously we will need similar coalitions elsewhere that can also unify across their cities.

Both of these coalitions have some connections already forming in SLAP. We still need to bring more organizers, unions, and organizations together to flesh out both these coalitions. And we hope people in and nearby SLAP will join us in these projects.

Building connections across sectors and locals is essential to waging the level of militant, shut-it-down strikes that we need to make real gains for public education and our communities. With the support of workers at the Port of Oakland and transit workers and many community members, for example, we can shut down the Port, Bay Area commerce, freeways, BART, etc. We can occupy public spaces and buildings, as parents and students did recently at school district offices during the Minneapolis teacher strike. We must significantly increase our leverage to build strikes where we can escalate our action; otherwise we risk the district attempting to wait us out and capitalize on our exhaustion to end a strike. As it is, there is not much capital flowing into the district; we need to go to the chokepoints and raise hell there in solidarity with workers who do have leverage at the point of production. This is how we hit the billionaires in the pockets until we get what we need for public education and working class communities.

Let's Make This Happen! Join Us!

To do all this work is, obviously, a lot of work. We are still a small group and we ourselves will need to prioritize what we can do at this moment. We are laying out what we need to grow in the next few years, though, so we (and hopefully others) have a vision for what's needed. We also can only be successful in this work if more people align with these plans and make them happen. Certainly we are open for friendly ideas and suggestions to this plan from any allies. But most of all we need people to help us build these coalitions and these movements and campaigns.

So please join us! Joining us means talking with us politically. Contact us. It also means joining us as we form these coalitions. Best of all it means joining us as more involved leader and organizer who can help us pull together these coalitions and campaigns.

