

The California Teacher Movement

A Report and Assessment

Jack Gerson

May 31, 2019

Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, the teacher movement in California is not building on, or even replicating, the most important positives of the red state teacher strikes.

Specifically: the red state strikes cut across geographic and demographic boundaries: they rapidly spread statewide, and they embraced teachers and non-teachers. And, importantly, they were not deterred by legalisms — teacher strikes were illegal in these states, but they struck successfully anyway, embracing militant action and confrontation rather than a narrow legalistic and “collaborative” approach.

In contrast, in California teacher locals are striking one at a time — Los Angeles in January; Oakland in February; Union City in May (they’re on strike now). And the main statewide teacher union, CTA, heavily pushes a very legalistic and very cautious approach, one that relies on appealing to Democratic party politicians on a very passive, “seat at the table”, don’t confront — collaborate approach. This bears out what we observed a year ago: the red state strikes were successful where the state and national teacher unions were weakest precisely because those unions were too weak to strangle incipient militancy. In California, CTA has vast resources which it uses to restrain militancy.

Thus: in Los Angeles and in Oakland, the strikes were settled with less than could have been won — in Los Angeles, the settlement was mediocre; in Oakland, it was worse. In both cases, the union leaders invited prominent Democrats in to help settle the strikes. And despite ongoing rhetoric about the need to move towards statewide strikes, not only did LA and Oakland strike at different times when they could have struck at the same time, but their new contracts don’t expire at the same time — the LA contract expires in June 2021, the Oakland contract in June 2022. In other words, they’ve moved away from coordinating for a statewide strike.

More: A week ago, on May 22nd, there was a statewide mobilization of teachers to converge on Sacramento. It was initially billed as a convergence to support Sacramento city teachers, who were going to strike on that day. But then, CTA reversed field and leaned on the Sacramento teachers to call off their planned strike. The reason is obvious: CTA made May 22nd into a toothless day for lobbying legislators — and only top CTA leadership and some local presidents got to do that lobbying. The rest of us were fed lunch on the Capitol Mall lawn, and then marched around downtown for an hour or two (and then there were some of those lame union chants, that are at best reminiscent of high school cheerleading and at worst of kindergarten).

Worse: at the same time as that toothless CTA Sacramento event, Union City teachers were (and still are) striking. But CTA is doing the opposite of trying to spread that strike to other locals, or to even hold partial work stoppages. And in the absence of that, what happens? Well, what's going on in Oakland is a good example of that.

The day after the Oakland strike ended, the school district laid off about 150 classified school workers (mainly SEIU members), eliminated several student programs, and closed several school libraries (laying off librarians in the process).

About two weeks after the Oakland strike ended, state superintendent of public instruction Tony Thurmond (an insurgent Democrat who has been heavily supported by CTA, OEA and DSA) appointed a panel to study and report back with recommendations on charter school regulation reform — an eleven-member panel, seven of whom have strong ties to the charter school industry.

About a month after the Oakland strike ended, the Alameda County Office of Education took over full control of the Oakland school district's finances — the district's deputy superintendent for business was fired (he was somewhat honest) and the district's Chief Financial Officer now reports to the County superintendent of schools. This was done under legislation — AB1840 — that also assigns the Fiscal Control and Management Assistance Team (FCMAT) to monitor OUSD finances and, together with the county office of education, to enforce budget cuts. (Indeed, the layoffs and cuts that were made just after the OEA strike ended were done at the insistence of FCMAT.) During the state takeover of OUSD, 2003 — 2009, FCMAT, please note, were the state-imposed auditors and, as such, gave a green light to severe downsizing (layoffs, school closures, program cuts, library closures) and a steep increase in outsourcing to private consultants. Then, from 2013 — 2017, FCMAT campaigned to have City College of San Francisco's academic accreditation revoked (eventually defeated because of a huge pushback by the SF community, but not before enrollment dropped significantly and several programs were cut).

What is CTA doing about this? Nothing — they supported AB1840 when it was adopted by the legislature last year. What is the OEA leadership doing? They're hoping to elect some better school board members in November 2020 (besides that being 18 months away, there's not much chance of success there; first of all, pro-corporate candidates are heavily funded by the real estate and financial interests that run the city; and second, even when a well-intentioned “reformer” gets elected, they change their tune almost immediately to become executors of cutbacks and feeding private contractors.)

To end on a more positive note — it's clear that teachers' energy and expectations have been lifted by the success of the red state strikes. There are a number of rank and file teachers who are not happy with the OEA contract and who think that the union should not have folded the strike when and how they did. Most of them are not yet ready to completely give up on the leadership, which after all has been in office for less than a year, and which did mobilize well for the strike (but ran the strike top down; relied on the Democrats to deliver; pursued an opaque, cautious approach rather than confronting corporate power by shutting down the port and the city center).

But the red state strikes have revived the strike as a weapon. For years, the CTA leadership and allies in local leadership pushed back against any talk of striking — those who advocated building for strikes were called “strike-happy”. This year, amid the surge of expectations generated by the red state strikes, CTA has had to change its tune. Rather than opposing strikes in Los Angeles and Oakland, it sought to control them, to keep them short (six school days in Los Angeles, seven in

Oakland) and non-confrontational, and to lobby for modest settlements brokered by Democratic Party politicians.

However, strikes – even relatively short ones – are schools whose participants learn a great deal about what it will take to win. New leaders and increased rank and file awareness often emerge from these struggles. For sure, some of the younger teachers are learning, and maybe their patience with the current leaders will soon wear thin. For some it already has: there are signs of incipient organized opposition. That is a start – just a start, but a start nonetheless.

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