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Seven Days that Shook Oakland and the One that Shook Us Up
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SEVEN DAYS THAT SHOOK OAKLAND

“One! We are the teachers!”

On Friday, March 1, 2019, a mass picket line of striking Oakland teachers, other district workers, students, and community members chanted loudly as we surrounded La Escuelita Elementary School in Oakland, California, to block school board members from meeting to impose cuts to classified workers (e.g., office workers and custodians) and vital student programs.

“Two! A little bit louder!”

As a longtime Oakland teacher and our union’s designated organizer for one of seven school clusters in the district, I helped to coordinate this mass picket line. Oakland Education Association (OEA) members traveled from the pickets at their schools on the seventh day of an astonishingly powerful strike to actively support district workers and students, many who actively supported our fight.

“Three! We want justice . . .”

Two days earlier, more than a thousand picketers shut down the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) board’s attempt to meet, and we were poised to do so again.

“for our students!”

We insisted that the district meet our demands for the schools that students deserve by reallocating its overspending on top administrator salaries and consultant contracts—not by cutting student programs and our fellow workers’ jobs.

This concerted solidarity represented a sharp break from our strike of 1996, which lasted 26 days. Then, as now, OEA demanded that the district “chop from the top” to support school sites. We called for the district to cut spending on central office administrators to pay for smaller class sizes and to retain experienced educators by raising pay from the lowest in the county to the median (Oakland Education Association, 2018).¹ In 2019, we also demanded that the district reduce its exorbitant spending on consultants (Oakland Education Association, 2018),² provide more counselors, nurses, and other student-support staff, and abandon plans for school closures targeting Black and Brown communities.

But in 1996, OEA tacitly allowed the district to interpret “the top” and “central office” to mean not only top administrators but also low-paid classified workers represented by other unions. This divide-and-conquer strategy worked: Leaders of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees—primarily representing custodians, food-service workers, and aides to students with disabilities—and Service Employees International Union—representing office workers, school security staff, and paraprofessional classroom aides—denounced OEA at school board meetings during the strike. They echoed the district’s charge that OEA was a mostly white union that hurt Black workers, students, and families in Oakland (Olszewski, 1996).³ In 2019, OEA seemed to correct this historical error by repeatedly stating our opposition

¹ According to financial reports submitted by all school districts, OUSD spends a far higher percentage of its budget on administration and far less on classroom instruction than any other district in Alameda County, year after year (Oakland Education Association, 2018).

² According to state records for 2016–17, OUSD spent more than three and a half times as much per student on consultants and service contracts than the state average for districts with 30,000 or more students (Oakland Education Association, 2018).

³ Fifty-two percent of OUSD teachers in 1996 were people of color, and about 34% of the total were Black. But, overall, Oakland educators did not look like their students: Fifty-three percent of students were Black, 19% were Latino, 21% were of Asian descent, and 7% were white (Olszewski, 1996). In 2019, the percentage of Black teachers plummeted to 21%. Meanwhile, gentrification has drastically reduced the Black student population to about 24% of all who attend the district’s public (non-charter) schools. The portion of Latino students (42%) has more than doubled since 1996, the share of white students has grown to almost 12%, and for students of Asian descent it has dropped to 13% (Oakland Unified School District, 2018).

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to cuts to any non-managerial positions and using direct action to block such cuts during our strike. But this was about to rapidly change.

At 2:00 p.m., precisely when the school board meeting we were blocking was scheduled to begin, OEA members received a text message announcing that the union and the district had reached a tentative agreement (TA), declaring it “a historic victory” for our union and the community. Cheers erupted as members read the text and grew louder when OEA President, Keith Brown, appeared and waved to picketers as he walked past the line.

Crowds of picketers continued to seal off the building, refusing to yield to board members who were holding cell phones displaying the TA proclamation in their outstretched hands. But then, a surprising announcement from an unexpected source reinforced the message from these bought-and-paid-for privatizing board members. A few people circulating with bullhorns repeatedly announced, “OEA leadership says, ‘End the pickets. Spread the word.’”

Suddenly, confusion began to overtake the joyous, militant spirit that had prevailed throughout the seven-day strike. Many asked, “Why are we taking down the picket? Aren’t we still going to stop the board from cutting workers’ jobs and students’ programs?” Some asked, “Isn’t the strike still on until the tentative agreement is ratified by the membership?” A group of picketers began to sing, “Which side are you on?” Exactly to whom they were directing the question—district or OEA leaders—was unclear.

What did become clear over the next two days was that many OEA members were extremely upset after reading the TA. It included very small concessions to our major demands of class size reduction and more student supports. Inflation would render the pay “raise” a cut in real income by the end of the contract in 2022. For the demand to stop the targeting of Black and Brown communities with about 24 school closures, the district committed only to a five-month pause until the end of the summer. Few members agreed with the union leadership’s claim that this TA represented a historic victory, even if many recognized that the massive participation of OEA members and community supporters was an important achievement. It is rare for a large percentage of teachers to vote no on any TA—especially after two years of bargaining or when the TA comes during a strike. Both conditions applied to this TA. Nevertheless, when the OEA Representative Council met the next day to debate and make its recommendation on the TA to the membership, it advised ratification by a razor-thin margin: 53 yes, 50 no, 2 abstentions. The following day, 42% of nearly 2,000 participating members voted against the recommended settlement. Many who voted yes said they were unhappy with the agreement but did not believe we could unify enough members and the community to continue the strike after the announcement of a historic victory.

OEA’s strike electrified the city with its unprecedented community support and strong participation by members. Beyond the local significance, it represented the continuation of a militant upsurge among education workers that swept across several red states in 2018 and continued into California in 2019, starting with the Los Angeles educators strike in January. After we struck in Oakland, the insurgency continued with Chicago teachers walking out for 11 days in October. Each successive strike brings new lessons and questions that we must consider carefully. There is much to celebrate and learn from in the solid organizing by members and newly elected union leadership that contributed to the power of the strike.

There is also much to learn from considering the criticisms and questions raised by members and supporters during and after the strike. During the strike, many OEA members questioned the total lack of transparency in bargaining. They also questioned the failure to follow through with a mass picket with longshore workers’ support to shut down the Port of Oakland,

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which might have changed the balance of power in bargaining. The 1996 and 2019 strikes showed that shutting down schools is a necessary, but insufficient, condition to decisively win a public school strike.⁴ In 2019, union members and community supporters asked why we ended an extremely powerful strike after seven days with such meager gains for our major demands. When the district announced in the fall that it had ended the 2018–19 school year with a \$21 million budget surplus, some asked why the leaders of OEA and our state affiliate, the California Teachers Association, had confirmed the district’s claim that it could not afford to meet more of our demands.

Some OEA leaders have condemned such public criticism, claiming that it undermines our union’s recently elected leadership of color and, thereby, hurts the fight for racial justice. Such a response bears an eerie resemblance to the rhetoric OUSD board members and administrators of color have long used to attack opponents of the district’s destructive policies. Without a doubt, it is important for a major portion of OEA leadership to be people of color, especially in a district where Black and Brown students comprise the overwhelming majority. But to use racial identity to invalidate criticism and discredit critics is to evade accountability. Democratic debate about how to effectively fight for racial and economic justice is vital to that struggle.

To its credit, our current leadership has done far more than any other in memory to get members involved in organizing at its schools and building relationships with families and community allies. Yet some members who are engaging in that work say they are frustrated that OEA leadership appears hesitant to mobilize forcefully in response to the district’s increasingly aggressive actions since the strike, such as continuing to close schools and blatantly violating our contract and members’ rights. The district is renegeing on our new contract’s commitment to provide additional student supports, has unilaterally changed members’ ability to accumulate unused sick days and retirement credit, and is refusing to pay millions of dollars owed to the district employees’ health benefits fund. In October, OUSD police violently attacked parents and teachers at a school board meeting who were peacefully protesting school closures.

When OEA’s Representative Council met in September, a majority of school site representatives resisted pressure to immediately ratify the leadership’s strategic plan for the coming year. Some had specific questions and criticisms of the plan, but even more representatives stressed the importance of giving members a chance to scrutinize the plan and provide substantive input. A few representatives explicitly linked this stance to doubts and anger spawned by the conclusion of our recent strike.

Some may deem such distrust to be divisive, but skepticism is essential to a strong, democratic union. “Trust your leaders” is not a value that supports a powerful movement; on the contrary, it is the catchphrase of top-down organizations with leaders who inevitably, though sometimes unwittingly, cave to their enemies. Shutting down criticism or refusing to take it seriously promotes rank-and-file cynicism far more than open, principled debate does.

Our strike tapped into enormous power among our members, awakening in them the power to organize and mobilize to a degree many had not imagined possible. As OEA leaders

⁴ In California this is partly because a district’s state funding is based on either the current or prior year’s average daily attendance, whichever is greater (California Education Code, 1979; Bazeley, 1996). Also, one cannot assume that district officials—who may actively undermine and privatize their public schools—worry as much about revenue for those schools as corporate owners care about their company’s profits. The potential leverage wielded by striking public school workers is far more political than financial. Therefore, targeting major politicians and corporate interests with no formal authority over a school district can exert powerful pressure on local education officials.

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have said, this result of our strike truly was a victory. Along with it comes the critical consciousness and determination to take organizing to an even deeper level than what it took to prepare for the strike.

Several OEA leaders have credited Jane McAlevey's (2016) book, *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age*, for providing crucial guidance in their organizing work that led to a powerful strike. They have cited her advice that, to win, leaders must identify *organic* rank-and-file leaders, hold one-on-one conversations with members, and use mobilizations as *structure tests* to assess the union's readiness to take increasingly high-risk actions before ultimately striking.

Many of the OEA representatives who insisted on postponing the vote on the strategic plan said it was necessary to involve as many members as possible in thinking about and developing the union's strategic vision. They explained that doing so would yield a better strategy and plan, and that such engagement was vital in order for members to buy in to the fight ahead. Without having read her book, these representatives were articulating one of McAlevey's (2016) most important lessons:

People participate to the degree they understand—but they also understand to the degree they participate. It's dialectical. Power-structure analysis is the mechanism that enables ordinary people to understand their potential power and participate meaningfully in making strategy. When people understand the strategy because they helped make it, they will be invested for the long haul, sustained and propelled to achieve more meaningful wins. Three key variables are crucial to analyzing the potential for success in the change process: power, strategy, and engagement. Three questions must be asked: Is there a clear and comprehensive power-structure analysis? Does the strategy adopted have any relationship to a power-structure analysis? How, if at all, are individuals being approached and engaged in the process, including the power analysis and strategy, not just the resulting collective action? (p. 6)

A key point here is that the most powerful organizing is deeply democratic and involves members in analyzing and strategizing. In Oakland, McAlevey's argument that an effective strategy must connect to a power-structure analysis leads to a second conclusion—especially in light of our experiences in 1996 and 2019. Given that our analysis tells us that billionaires and capitalists are driving school privatization, a strategy of exerting pressure primarily on the district by shutting down schools in a strike won't be sufficient. We also will have to confront corporate power by disrupting business as usual (e.g., at the Port of Oakland) to demand a redistribution of corporate wealth to fund public schools and services, as well as organizing to strike throughout California, a state with 157 billionaires at last count (Kroll & Dolan, 2019).

Though the settlement of OEA's strike in 2019 was not a historic victory, the strike registered a historic impact that continues to ripple through our ranks. The dust has not settled. Many who actively participated are still seeking new ways to fight old, powerful forces at every level, to learn from history so as not to repeat it. The slog toward a real historic victory continues.

Author Biography

Craig Gordon has been a teacher in Oakland since 1990, an Oakland Education Association (OEA) site representative and Executive Board member, and a lead cluster organizer during the 2019 strike.

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