

"Now more than ever, we need our teachers and counselors to help our students"

## Teachers, students denounce Santa Ana school district's layoff nearly 300 educators

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In the face of an angry protest by hundreds of teachers, students and parents, the Santa Ana Unified School District school board voted at a specially called meeting Friday night to lay off nearly 300 elementary and high school educators, counselors, social workers and support staff at the end of the 2024-2025 school year.

The vote at the special meeting January 31 was 4-1 in favor of the layoffs.

At the regularly scheduled board meeting three days earlier, hundreds of students, parents and educators addressed the board to protest and denounce the proposed layoffs. There was standing room only, as they filled the school board chamber, as well as the adjacent "overflow" room. Even though the board sounded a buzzer, limiting each speaker to one minute, the meeting went on until almost midnight.

Looming over this massive assault on public education is the fight against the Trump administration's deportation sweeps targeting immigrant workers and youth, which several educators spoke about. The working class must mobilize to defend public education and the defense of immigrant workers against Trump's illegal mass deportations.

Santa Ana Unified School District is the 12th-largest school district in California. It is located in Orange County, south of Los Angeles, and has 44,100 students, 93 percent of whom are Latino. The 1,836 teachers and 2,500 staff are represented by the Santa Ana Educators Association (SAEA), National Union of Health Care Workers and Communication Workers of America Local 9510. But none of these unions have proposed

any joint actions or strike action to oppose the layoffs and defend the largely Latino immigrant population in the city.

In December, the district approved a "Budget Stabilization Plan" that threatened the layoffs. District Superintendent Jerry Almendarez said the decision was a necessary sacrifice that would not severely impact students and families. Almendarez received \$447,561 in compensation in 2022, and the meeting agenda originally included a proposal to increase his pay by 3 percent plus a one-time 3 percent bonus. When the audience loudly denounced the proposal, obscene in the context of mass layoffs and budget cuts, the board withdrew it.

In a scenario replicated in thousands of cities across the country, educators and students protested the deep cuts to vitally necessary programs, staff and educators' jobs as the result of the Biden administration's ending of federal ESSER (Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief) funds. The Trump administration will not just continue the attacks but is seeking the outright dismantling of public education itself.

According to Santa Ana Mayor Valerie Amezcuca, the district has a \$187 million budget shortfall, based on the ending of ESSER funds and declining enrollment. The board listed 546 positions that will be reduced or eliminated at the end of the 2024-2025 school year. These include 186 elementary teachers, 12 transitional kindergarten teachers, high school math, English and social science teachers, curriculum specialists, 90 counselors and 14 social workers.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with several

educators and students. Jessica Berenda, a special education teacher at Romero-Cruz Academy, said, “Special ed is not affected right now, but even at the national level, if they cut funding for Title I schools or federal funds for special education, that’s our funding. We’re funded by the federal government, not the local government.

“Right now at our school we have now four special ed teachers and four counselors. But they might lose their jobs in these layoffs. And that’s going to be huge for our kids. We have a lot of kids that have a lot of issues. They need the therapy. They need the help. It’s already running thin. A lot of behaviors and a lot of things to tackle. They have a lot of issues at home, and they come to school for relief, and we’ve got to help them.”

In regards to the deportations, Jessica said, “I haven’t had any kids *not* coming, but they are very nervous. I actually have a window that looks out to the street area, and every time they see the police, they say, ‘ICE?’ Some of them joke about it, but some are actually scared for their families. They don’t know what’s going to happen.

“Personally, I keep my [classroom] door locked, and I already have a plan in place should push come to shove. But hopefully we don’t have to face that. I lock my door, and I’m not going to let them in, while the principal can let them into the school. They cannot come into my classroom. And I will fight that personally. And I know that a lot of our teachers are going to do the same thing.

“We need to unite nationally, not just the California Teachers Association. In every school from Texas to Florida, they’re taking away teachers’ rights to teach in the classroom, and they’re just questioning people who have dedicated their lives to becoming teachers. They need to trust that we’re doing what’s best for students.”

Anamaria Cervantes, a junior at Segerstrom High School, said, “I’m sure people are angry, but I think the main emotion is fear because no one knows what is going to happen, and many people are losing their only source of income.

“My friend and I and our library staff put together a massive survey poll. ... So, with this poll, even if the students can’t be here at this meeting, they can have a voice in this.”

As to the results, Anamaria said, “Besides focusing on class scheduling, 45 percent of the students said that the counselors push us to be better. That’s one of the biggest things they’ve done for us. Or to provide a safe space where we can go to feel welcome and to accept us without any questions and make us feel special. And 90 percent of them said these counselors go above and beyond in so many ways that we can’t even describe. And they had amazing things to say about these counselors.”

Karen Pineda, a counselor at Segerstrom High School, said, “I’m here to support my fellow educators but also myself as a counselor because our positions are being threatened to be cut. We have about 500+ educators who are at risk of losing their jobs. They range from teachers in kindergarten, elementary, high school. Typically, the people who work one on one with students. Our counselors face a 40 percent reduction.”

A teacher who addressed the school board meeting on January 28 said, “Now more than ever, we need our teachers and counselors to help our students,” referring to the mass deportation raids across the country.

Workers and youth must establish independent rank-and-file committees in schools and neighborhoods to fight the layoffs and the deportations. The union leaders are tied to the Democratic Party, which are endorsing the Trump administration’s sweeping attacks on the democratic rights of the working class in the most cowardly fashion. These rank-and-file committees must fight for socialist policies that unite working people across industries and national boundaries in the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).



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