

# Los Angeles teachers protest budget cuts

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Hundreds of teachers protested last Wednesday against cuts being made to schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the second largest school district in the United States. The teachers were protesting a threatened reduction in health care benefits, a proposed increase in class sizes by an average of five students per class, and a three-year pay increase freeze, among other issues.

The protests were held five days prior to the district's deadline to submit a balanced budget document to the state capital. The deadline was officially announced last October when LAUSD superintendent and former Navy vice admiral David Brewer sent out a notice to all LAUSD employees informing them of the deadline and announcing imminent plans to determine which programs would be cut to balance the budget.

The Wednesday event was the culmination of more than two months of protest actions across the Los Angeles area in opposition to the cuts. While the district's proposal is in response to the \$2.5 billion reduction in statewide K-12 school spending, \$250 million of which will be cut from LAUSD alone. (See article: "Fiscal emergency declared in California" )

Reporters for the World Socialist Web Site visited protests outside of LAUSD district offices in the cities of Carson and North Hollywood and spoke to teachers and supporters at both locations.

In Carson, Maria Smith, who teaches a 4th and 5th grade combination class, said, "For me, health care is the most important issue. I have a family with two children; one is five years old and the other is two years old. The cuts aren't just robbing me. They're robbing from my family; they're robbing from people who've already worked most of their lives.

"They've frozen our budget, but we're still working anyway. You know, there comes a point when you have to take a stand. I'm not political, but you have to stand and fight for what you believe in."

Jennifer Albright, a 4th grade teacher with 13 years experience, said, "The state handed out a 4.5 percent COLA [cost-of-living allowance] to every district. We never got our COLA. The Board of Education kept it. For me, that's a big deal. Cuts are coming down and



there's no talk about advances." Jennifer Albright

She also expressed the hope that the protest would garner widespread support among teachers both in and outside of Los Angeles, saying, "This is not just happening here. It's everywhere. All the teachers should walk out across the country. If it were even statewide, that would be great."

Albright also expressed great frustration with the incoming Obama administration. "I have been very disappointed in Obama. I'd be interested to see if he appoints the head of the Washington DC school district as secretary of education. There was an article in *Time* magazine about her. She wants to align teachers' salaries to test scores and that's a real attack on teachers," Albright said.



Dee Burke

Dee

Burke is a special education teacher at Carson Street Elementary School who has been a teacher for 33 years. She said, “It’s about our health benefits, modest raises, and stopping all the waste. The district wants everyone on Kaiser [a large health insurance provider in the state of California] alone. They also want a two-tier health care system so young teachers won’t be able to get full benefits.”

Decrying some of the unique difficulties teachers face, Burke pointed out, “Special ed money got frozen. We used to have a budget of \$500-\$600 per year to purchase all the things we need for individual children. This year it’s \$198. So, yes, we have to make up the difference from our own pockets.”

In North Hollywood, many students also came out in support of their teachers. Ryan, a senior at North Hollywood High School, spoke about the impact the cuts will have on students. He said, “We’re here to support our teachers because we feel that these ridiculously large cuts will hurt students as well. They’re going to fire teachers and it’s just not fair. I hope that by coming out here and spreading the word, a lot of people will open their eyes about what’s going on.”

WSWS reporters also spoke with Rick, a 5th grade teacher at Pacific Boulevard School in Huntington Park, California, which is part of LAUSD. He expressed frustration with rampant waste and mismanagement in the district, along with the limited perspective of the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA), the teachers union that organized the protest

action.

“To cite one example of the waste we have to deal with, after the payroll systems failed at LAUSD several months ago, leaving many teachers either underpaid or not paid at all for several periods, the district hired back the same consulting firm which caused the problem in the first place and paid them millions of extra dollars in the process.”

“As far as the conduct of the UTLA itself is concerned, I recently attended a political action workshop held by the Wellstone Institute--named after the late Democratic Senator from Minnesota--and sponsored by the UTLA. The event was held prior to the November elections and one of our exercises was to create a 30-second video ad for Obama. I felt like leaving many times. Events like this show you just how the bureaucracy pushes its pro-big business agenda on the membership. They are tied to the Democratic Party in so many ways and that disgusts me.”

A recent November edition of the UTLA newsletter used several pages to praise the election of Barack Obama. A column written by UTLA Vice President Joshua Pechthalt, for example, expressed the absurd hope that an Obama administration would quickly withdraw troops from both Iraq and Afghanistan and cut the US military budget in half. The 35-page newsletter failed altogether to mention the multi-trillion-dollar Wall Street bailout, and devoted a mere two sentences to the California budget deficit, which is now projected to grow to an estimated \$41.8 billion by July 2010.



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