

Los Angeles School Board eliminates thousands of teachers' jobs

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The decision by the Los Angeles School Board to eliminate thousands of positions is the latest in a series of attacks on California teachers. The vote by the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) came at a special April 14 meeting called to address a budget deficit of \$596 million for 2009-2010.

In the face of protests outside and pleas—at times tearful—from teachers, community activists and parents inside the board's meeting room, the board voted to eliminate 5,400 positions, mostly newer untenured teachers, but also including counselors, custodians, clerks and other employees.

At the meeting last month LAUSD Board President Monica Garcia also enumerated other ways in which the school system would gut its budget. These included cuts at the board of education, furloughs, a freeze on raises and “a push for early retirement.”

The crisis facing Los Angeles' public schools is the direct result of multi-billion dollar education cuts pushed through by California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and the Democratic Party-controlled State Legislature. The state faces a budget deficit of over \$40 billion, and the political establishment is determined to make workers pay for the crisis.

The attack on education in California is part of a nationwide trend. Trillions of dollars have been turned over to the banks—by both the Bush and now Obama administrations—while critical social programs are targeted for cuts. Obama is seeking cuts across the budget and has proclaimed his commitment to reducing spending on Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid.

There is growing opposition among workers to this attack on their jobs and livelihoods, which came out at the April 14 meeting. One teacher observed that over half the teachers at her school had received “reduction in force (RIF) notices.” “How can you expect my students and others to excel when 53 per cent of our staff might be gone?” she asked. “How

can you expect my second graders to have faith in the system if they're given more obstacles to overcome?”

Others noted that the layoffs would have a devastating impact on teachers and communities already stricken by the economic crisis.

As one speaker put it, “in today's wrecked economy, thousands of them [parents of LAUSD students] are unemployed, facing home foreclosures and even homelessness. Others do not know what will hit them tomorrow. What they need as parents more than anything right now is stability in their schools.”

Despite these pleas, the seven-member board voted 4-3 to go ahead with the 5,400 layoffs. An additional 1,999 possible layoffs were rescinded.

The United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) has left teachers and workers defenseless in the face of these attacks. At an April 24 meeting called for teachers given RIF notices, union officials repeated the refrain that the Obama administration's stimulus money will be enough to save their positions, if only Superintendent Ramon Cortines would spend it all this year instead of spreading it out over two years.

The notion that there's enough money in the stimulus package to save all the teachers' jobs is disingenuous at best. In reality, the total amount of funding for the state of California to offset cuts in education is \$4.875 billion.

This money is to be allocated statewide, and is not to be used exclusively for the preservation of teachers' jobs. The Obama administration has made clear that further funding will be made conditional on the implementation of right-wing education reforms, including increased testing and merit pay for teachers.

Moreover, since the statewide teacher layoffs were announced, the state budget deficit has grown an additional \$8 billion.

At the RIF meeting, union president A.J. Duffy repeated the claim he had made at the board meeting, that according to the union's accountant, there's enough money in the stimulus to cover all of the positions this year and most of

next year. “What can’t be cut next year can be covered by continued deep cuts to the bureaucracy.”

When Duffy and other representatives of the UTLA speak of “the bureaucracy,” they are referring to all employees of the LAUSD; not only well-heeled administrators, but low-level clerical workers as well.

Some teachers expressed skepticism and anger toward the union officials. A Los Angeles high school teacher, who along with his wife, had recently received an RIF notice, spoke of his sense that he had been “used by the union like a bargaining chip” for his involvement in the January march and rally in downtown LA last January over budget cuts, layoffs, health care and other issues. “I feel like the union says, ‘We feel your pain, we sympathize with you’...but UTLA didn’t really stick their necks out for the RIF’d teachers...After this vote, what is your plan?”

The response from the UTLA officials to this teacher’s question was pitiful. The UTLA has called for a one-day “work stoppage” on Friday, May 15. One official claimed, “We have to have a powerful action on May 15, a one-day work stoppage. It’s unprecedented...we have to make a stand now.”

The UTLA has done everything in its power to ensure that this so-called protest against the budget cuts will be as painless as possible for the local school district. In addition to the fact that it is limited to a single day and has been announced weeks ahead of time so that school administrators can make advance preparations, it will also take place on a testing day, when teachers are not needed in the classroom and can be easily replaced by exam proctors.

The absurdity of expecting results from a one-day “work stoppage” (the union refuses to even say “strike”), announced weeks before undertaking it, was not lost on one first grade teacher, who asked, “Why is it a one-day strike? Why aren’t we striking until we get what we want?”

Meanwhile, news broke that on Tuesday the school board floated a proposal to the union in an effort to bring them on board in the actual implementation of the budget cuts.

According to an article in the Daily News, the LAUSD “invited union officials to scour district books for savings on the condition unions match the amount dollar for dollar with furloughs, pay cuts and other concessions.” The ostensible purpose of the board’s resolution is “to save jobs,” a goal that according to them “will require creativity, a willingness to come together at the table with all our partners, and a sacrifice from all district employees.”

“Saving jobs,” like “shared sacrifice,” has long been a mantra used by employers in the auto and other industries to exact ever more concessions from workers. The concessions never achieve their supposed goal. In fact, job cuts continue unabated, as the recent experience of Michigan’s auto

workers can attest.

All the arguments of the UTLA are intended to obscure the basic issue: the attack on California teachers is part of a coordinated drive to make workers pay for the economic crisis created by the financial speculation of the ruling elite. This drive has the full support of the Democratic Party, both on a statewide and national level. The Democratic Party not only overwhelmingly passed the latest cuts to education in the state senate and assembly, but also helped to initially craft them.

According to the recently-released list of the world’s billionaires, published by *Forbes*, the city of Los Angeles is home to 17 individuals whose average net worth is \$2.4 billion. Neither the unions nor anyone in the political establishment would suggest that the wealth of these individuals should be sacrificed to preserve an education system that serves hundreds of thousands.

In order to defend public education in California, teachers, educators, parents, and students must begin by rejecting the efforts to foist the burden of the state’s financial meltdown on the backs of working people, who did nothing to create the present situation.

The fight against the attack on education requires a new political strategy based on a complete break with the Democratic and Republican Parties. A socialist strategy is needed, one which rejects not only the gutting of funding for education and social services, but also the economic system, capitalism, that subordinates everything to private profit and the wealth accumulation of a tiny elite.

This is the perspective of the Socialist Equality Party and its student organization, the International Students for Social Equality. We urge LA teachers and students to join the SEP and ISSE and take up the fight for socialism.



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