

Los Angeles sends layoff notices to 5,200 teachers

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The Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) voted March 2 to send layoff notices to more than 5,200 workers. These included 2,000 elementary school teachers, 2,370 certified management employees, 321 secondary teachers and teachers in the arts, and 574 support personnel, including counselors, psychologists, nurses and librarians. The district is facing a \$640 million budget gap.

The LAUSD is required by law to notify teachers at least six months in advance of the next school year of any possibility they will lose their jobs, even if not all employees are ultimately fired. Just under a year ago the school board approved 5,400 layoff notices for teachers, janitors, counselors and administrators. While federal stimulus monies were able to minimize losses to a certain extent, in the end 2,000 educators and staff lost their jobs.

In taking this action, Los Angeles is following a statewide trend. Just recently, San Francisco sent out 900 layoff notices, while the city of Long Beach sent out 755.

Should the 5,200 “pink slips” handed out in Los Angeles this year translate into actual layoffs, some schools in the city’s downtown area could be forced to sack 10 to 20 percent of their respective workforces. The layoffs would virtually eliminate school nurses and librarians, raise class sizes to 44 students per class at some middle schools, and increase counselor loads to 1,000 students per counselor in some cases.

In addition to the potential layoffs, the LAUSD is pushing to enact a 10 percent across-the-board pay cut and shorten the school year by five days. Certain staff members at LAUSD’s central headquarters are being asked to move to a 10 month per year calendar, the same as school-based employees, and to accept an 18

percent reduction in compensation.

However, School Board President Monica Garcia has said that even with these measures, the district will not save enough money to cover the deficit, thus necessitating the sending out of thousands of layoff notices this month.

Opposition to job and pay cuts on the part of the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA), the local union, has consisted almost entirely of searching for “district mismanagement.” UTLA Secondary Vice President Gregg Solkovits told the online newspaper the *DailyBreeze.com*, “We recognize that LAUSD’s funding has been severely cut, but we also know that this district has a long history of misplaced priorities and wasteful spending.”

While there is undoubtedly a certain amount of poorly spent money in LAUSD, the idea that combating “mismanagement” will somehow recover anywhere near the \$640 million needed to fill the hole in the district’s budget is absurd on its face. The UTLA knows this and ultimately accepts the fact that its membership will lose jobs and see their pay and benefits reduced.

Furthermore, by concentrating on the question of fiscal waste, the UTLA is diverting teachers’, parents’, and students’ attention from the real issue—the refusal of the state government and the Obama administration to provide adequate resources for education, even as the wealth of California’s richest residents and corporations is protected and the country’s banks receive massive bailouts from the federal treasury.

The various civil disobedience protest actions conducted last year by the UTLA bureaucracy—in which union leaders were arrested by police for disrupting school district meetings, only to be returned

within the hour to speak before the protesting membership outside—were little more than shenanigans. Their intention was to cover up the fact that the UTLA is opposed to conducting a real struggle to defend public education because it is wedded to the Democratic Party, which is carrying out the attack on teachers in both Sacramento and Washington.

On March 4 it was announced that despite the fact that California recently implemented legislation to bring public education policy in line with the demands of President Obama’s “Race to the Top” initiative, the state did not make it past the first round of the contest for \$4.7 billion in federal funding. Thus, the most populous state in the country will not receive so much as a dime from Washington to save its schools.

The UTLA’s opposition to fighting against the attacks on public education also stems from the fact that the union leadership is seeking ways to benefit—at the expense of teachers—from the city’s educational crisis. Over the course of the last month it has successfully positioned itself to occupy a new role as management in the public schools.

On February 23, the Los Angeles Board of Education voted to turn over control of 22 out of 30 LAUSD schools to the UTLA for administration. Thus, the union now stands to directly benefit from the imposition of staffing and pay cuts, as part of the drive to reduce costs at those institutions under its purview.

Charter school outfits, which had lobbied hard to obtain school sites, came away with four campuses. The Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, a non-profit controlled by Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, garnered three.

As part of the UTLA’s agreement with the district, the new “pilot” schools will receive a lump, per pupil, sum each year. They will hire new teachers based on an “Elect to Work” agreement, which states that while teachers will remain dues-paying members of the UTLA and be covered by the union’s collective bargaining agreement, they will also be considered voluntary employees. Thus, they can be transferred out of a given “pilot” school to poorer performing schools where teacher pay and job security are lower.

The agreement also stipulates that teachers may be called on to work more hours at any time. One of the new charter schools, the New Open World Academy (NOW) in Los Angeles, contains the following

language in its hiring contract: “Additional supplementary hours and tasks necessary to complete the NOW Academy mission may be required.” This is a recipe for forcing teachers to work uncompensated overtime, while their peers and other support staff are let go.

The decision to convert the district’s public schools arrived approximately one week prior to the announcement of possible layoffs. UTLA officials are now meeting with LAUSD board members to supposedly discuss alternatives to mass job cuts, including reductions in wages and other measures.

The assault on public education in Los Angeles and the role being played by the teachers’ union in this process underscores the need of teachers, parents, and students to form committees independent of the UTLA, and all the unions active in the schools, in order to defend jobs, pay and the right of every child to a decent education. Only on the basis of a political program that rejects the idea that education ought to be subordinated to the defense of private profit can a struggle to save public schooling be won.



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