

California budget crisis poses new attacks on teachers

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California politicians, at both the state and local level, are starting another round of attacks on teachers, exploiting the budget crisis to cut social spending and drive down living standards of teachers and other state workers.

Layoffs, furloughs, benefit cuts, poor classroom conditions and vilification of teachers have been the direct result of the policies of the Obama administration as well as the state government in Sacramento.

At a gathering of political leaders for an event hosted by the Public Policy Institute of California held in Sacramento December 7, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa argued that the leaders of United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) have been the “one unwavering roadblock to reform.”

What Villaraigosa, a Democrat, means by “reform” is revealed by his support for the Public School Choice movement and the building of charter schools, which he boasts have nearly doubled in Los Angeles.

Recognizing the union’s strategy of supporting the Democrats, he stated that “union leaders need to take notice that it is their friends, the very people who have supported them and the people whom they have supported, who are carrying the torch of education reform and crying out for the unions to join them.”

Villaraigosa made clear that “we cannot continue to automatically guarantee lifetime employment to all teachers, nor can we make decisions about assignments, transfers and layoffs solely on the basis of seniority. Tenure and seniority must be reformed or we will be left with only one option: eliminating it entirely.”

Villaraigosa is no stranger to UTLA. He served the union as a field representative/organizer, paving the way to his political career in the Democratic Party. He is now calling on the unions to subordinate the jobs and rights of teachers and other workers to the California

budget and the overarching economic crisis. (See “Los Angeles schools suffer more job cuts”)

For its part, the UTLA accepts the ongoing cuts to public education. Its president, A.J. Duffy, responded immediately to Villaraigosa’s comments, declaring: “UTLA has and continues to work in collaboration with all stakeholders. Pointing fingers and laying blame does not help improve our schools. UTLA will continue our partnership with all parties to overcome the devastating effects of the budget cuts on the education program for our students.”

This is a clear confirmation that UTLA, in partnership with the Democrats, will readily implement any measure sought by the state, so long as a seat at the negotiating table can be reserved for its well-paid leadership.

When the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) voted last March in favor of more than 5,000 furlough notices, the union’s role was clearly to contain teachers’ opposition to the measure. In fact, UTLA leaders advanced the argument that the furloughs were only temporary and were necessary to avoid layoffs.

The ongoing strike of teachers in La Habra, California exposes the fraud of this approach. In a district that serves 5,400 students, 225 educators are picketing against pay reductions, furloughs and benefit cuts. Many of them are expressing their anger over the permanent character of these cutbacks, which the UTLA and other teachers’ unions had claimed were only provisional measures.

For its services, UTLA has been awarded the administration of several charter schools. Significantly, Villaraigosa himself fully supports school conversion and, through a non-profit organization called Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, has been able to

gain control of three such schools.

The current movement to “reform” education through charter schools has little to do with improving the education of students, let alone the conditions of teachers. (See “Los Angeles expands charter schools in attack on public education”) Instead, it seeks to dismantle public education for the purpose of creating unprecedented profit opportunities for private investors. Decay in the quality of education and the rise of job insecurity are the logical outcomes of such “reform.”

One of the most vocal proponents of such “reform” is Michelle Rhee, former chancellor of Washington, D.C. public schools, who has helped to spearhead Obama’s school “reform” agenda and is notorious for firing hundreds of D.C. teachers last July.

Rhee is currently in the process of developing a lobbying organization—Students First—to push for charter schools. She has received a financial pledge for her organization from Eli Broad, a Los Angeles developer who supports education “reform” and has provided \$700,000 to 15 charter schools.

The movement in favor of charter schools—whose support is based on donations from super-wealthy individuals and their organizations, such as Oprah Winfrey, the Walton family, Bill Gates, and Warren Buffett—is exploiting the budget crisis in California to launch more class-based attacks and seek massive profits.

The newly elected governor of California, Jerry Brown, whose campaign was heavily supported by the trade unions, is calling on lawmakers, both Democratic and Republican, to come together and make the hard choices that need to be made. Hard for whom?

Brown has promised that he will not raise any taxes unless approved by the voters. However, he is insisting that the vote be based on a “yes or no” tax vote, with no distinction between taxes on workers and taxes on the rich.

Knowing that such a ballot on taxes would most likely fail, Brown is using it as a pretext to brutally slash social spending under the guise of voter support. Brown is currently working with political operatives on the best way to sell ballot proposals on the budget.

California is currently facing a \$25 billion deficit. If taxes are not raised or revenue found elsewhere, \$6 billion will have to be cut in the 2010-2011 fiscal year, and another \$19 billion in 2011-2012.

More cuts to social spending to meet the budget deficit will be devastating. At a budget forum on last week, State Controller John Chiang jokingly referred to himself and other fiscal advisors as the “four horsemen of the Apocalypse.”



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