California teachers' unions collaborate with state officials to impose cuts

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The United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) has once again collaborated with the Democratic Party to impose sharp cuts on Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) teachers and K-12 education.

Earlier this month, teachers approved a contract that includes as many as six unpaid furlough days. This amounts to an effective pay cut under conditions of an all-out attack on teachers throughout California. The contract was approved by a vote of 83 percent in favor and 17 percent against. The original contract proposal by the LAUSD included more than 5,000 layoffs as well as 12 unpaid furlough days.

The vote, far from being an indicator of widespread agreement with the furloughs, is instead an expression of teachers' fears that if they did not agree to the deal, they would face even harsher measures. The role of the union has been to insist that there is no alternative to accepting cuts, and that a struggle to defend, let alone advance, the position of teachers is impossible.

Outgoing UTLA President A.J. Duffy hailed the agreement. Duffy declared that the agreement "demonstrates that when UTLA and the district collaborate, problems can be solved to the benefit of our students."

In his May 20 online newsletter to teachers, Duffy said, "Your willingness to take a pay cut was one of the most courageous acts of rank-and-file members that I've seen in the history of my activism." This cynical remark clearly illustrates the rotten role played by Duffy and the UTLA in forcing Los Angeles teachers to pay for the California budget crisis. Over the past three years, the UTLA has done nothing to resist historic attacks on public education in Los Angeles, mounting only a few inconsequential "civil disobedience" actions meant to allow teachers to let off steam.

As for the claim that the deal saves jobs, this is a fraud. As many as 1,600 jobs will still be eliminated. Throughout the state, 20,000 teachers have received layoff notices, and their fate is still undecided.

According to Duffy, "This agreement will benefit teachers, health and human services professionals, parents and especially students, who will lose fewer instructional days and maintain class sizes next year. We now need to find long-term solutions to the budget crisis so that the classroom is not continuously threatened." What are the UTLA's long-term solutions? If the past is any indication, the UTLA will continue to coerce teachers into accepting concessions.

Over the last five years in particular, Los Angeles primary and secondary education has lost tens of millions of dollars. Per-pupil funding has dropped drastically. Summer school funding, textbooks, maintenance and technology have been slashed, and thousands of teachers have received pink slips. The UTLA facilitated all of these treacherous cuts.

The UTLA also supports the so-called education reform movement and the teacher evaluation methodology behind it, only expressing mild disagreement as to the exact evaluation system used.

Last week, as if on cue, the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) report on the LAUSD was released, which seeks to further victimize teachers for the crisis of public education. The NCTQ, which receives major funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, recommended that the right of teachers and administrators to collectively bargain over how employee evaluations are conducted be eliminated. It also urged that preferential hiring practices for teachers on illness and parental leave, as well as those victimized by school closures, be eliminated.

The UTLA leadership has tried to argue that without

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the union, the cuts to education would be much worse. In fact, the UTLA has worked to smother the immense anger and opposition among teachers by channeling it into support for the Democratic Party.

In 2008, after promising not to capitulate, the UTLA agreed to ratify a contract that included significant cuts to teachers. In his February 2008 President's Perspective, Duffy wrote, "Pretty bleak picture but let's remember that the picture was bleaker a few months ago…. As a parent and grandparent, I object to the governor's reckless course of action, which will force my grandchildren and their children to pay off the Schwarzenegger debt for years to come."

Duffy may have "objected" to the governor's budget proposal; however, he and his UTLA colleagues turned their backs on teachers and prevented members from taking real, meaningful strike action against the LAUSD and the California State Legislature.

Three years later, the state is still mired in a financial crisis and public education is once again under attack. The solution of Governor Jerry Brown and Democrats in the state legislature to the state's $25.4 billion budget deficit is to cut billions from social programs, while threatening billions more in cuts to K-12 education if a slate of regressive taxes is not extended. Republicans only favor further and deeper spending cuts in social services including education.

The set of regressive taxes includes a reduction of the state's dependent tax credit, a 1 percent increase in sales tax and a 0.5 percent vehicle registration fee increase. Like the rest of Brown's proposals, these measures overwhelmingly hurt the working class. Even if these measures are approved, financial support for schools and community colleges would still remain more than $4 billion below the 2007-2008 funding level.

The UTLA fully supported Brown and the Democrats in the 2010 election. Since taking office, however, Brown immediately began calling for drastic cuts to education as well as other vital social services. Said Brown, "If you want frugality, I'm your man." Union President Duffy and his UTLA colleagues responded by laying the blame entirely on inefficiencies within the district. The role of the UTLA has always been to justify concessions and shift the blame for the cuts away from the Democratic Party.

The actions of the UTLA are by no means an isolated phenomenon. All the major unions in California have fully supported Brown's budget proposals, campaigning for the tax increases and taking no steps to oppose huge cuts in health care, welfare and higher education. The California Teachers Association is now calling for the California Legislature to approve the tax extensions in the Capitol without a referendum.

The defense of public education and the interests of teachers requires a political struggle. Throughout the United States, cities and states, under both Democrats and Republicans, are imposing deep cuts, laying off thousands of teachers and shutting down schools. At a national level, the Obama administration has starved the states of funds and championed the victimization of teachers, including giving strong support to the "evaluation" schemes implemented in Los Angeles.

A new struggle of teachers against this attack requires a political break with the Democratic Party and an organizational break with the anti-working class organizations like the UTLA, through the formation of rank-and-file committees. This must be bound up with a struggle to connect the defense of public education with the socialist transformation of economic life.

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