

LA schools agreement to give unions greater role in imposing cuts

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11 January 2012

On December 15, the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) passed an agreement with the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) that will bypass traditional job protections in the name of giving more autonomy to local schools.

The measure was passed by 70 percent of voting union members. However, with over 16,000 of the union's 35,600 members abstaining, only 38 percent of the membership actually voted in favor of the deal.

The agreement, known as the "School Stabilization and Empowerment Initiative," replaces the previous "Public School Choice Initiative," which had allowed private companies and outside operators to convert new or existing schools to charters. Instead, the new initiative allows only in-district applicants to assume control, with UTLA serving as an administrative adviser.

The effect of the program will be to largely internalize into the public school system the attack on teachers currently allowed in charter schools, with the union—which has already been involved in charter operations—playing a critical role.

Under the new agreement individual schools, starting with the lowest performing, will have to develop improvement plans in return for exemption from district policies. Additionally, more flexibility over the school's curriculum and schedule, and greater authority over staffing decisions will be given to principals and administrative staff.

Schools affected under the stabilization and empowerment initiative will be automatically waived from the district policy of giving priority placement to recently laid off teachers in newly vacant positions. District officials claim that this will ensure the placement of teachers who are the "proper fit." In practice, however, districts and schools will have a free hand to replace experienced veterans with their younger and lower paid counterparts, if the positions are filled at all.

Moreover, schools can now enforce vaguely worded "Elect-to-Work" agreements that modify teachers' contracts on a "voluntary" basis. Such agreements are invariably implemented at charter schools and frequently include provisions forcing teachers to take on additional work beyond the scope of their qualifications, at administration discretion. All teachers at the affected schools are required to sign onto the new plan or seek a transfer.

With this new agreement, UTLA is adopting rules and provisions that rip up teacher job protections and make teachers little more than at-will employees, all in the name of defending the public school system. While district and union officials claim that such provisions make students a priority, the result will be, and is indeed intended to be, the opposite. Making teachers overworked, underpaid and subject to arbitrary dismissal will severely impact the quality of education, regardless of whether the curriculum is set at the district or the school.

These provisions are especially significant given the \$532 million deficit projected for LAUSD and Governor Jerry Brown's plans to make more cuts to education in the upcoming 2012-2013 fiscal year budget. The unions will play a primary role in enforcing cuts on the teachers.

The agreement is in line with the policies and slogans advanced by the United Teachers of Los Angeles since the onset of the economic crisis and the attendant cuts to education in Los Angeles. The union has continued to support the Obama administration and Governor Brown, who are now leading the attack on public education at the federal and state government levels. Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, a former UTLA field organizer, has also been spared from criticism.

The position of the UTLA is that teacher layoffs and public school cuts are solely the result of "district waste and mismanagement," not the policies of the Democrats

and Republicans. This is not the result of an innocent miscalculation or a lack of political understanding. It is advanced to shield the Democratic Party from responsibility. In the process, the union functions as an adjunct of the state and corporate interests seeking to undermine public education.

During the first three rounds of the so-called Public School Choice initiative, which opened up district schools to outside charter operators, the UTLA was able to gain control of more than two thirds of those schools under its Pilot School Program. The program places union officials at the heads of these schools in which they have full autonomy to slash wages and benefits and even to fire UTLA members.

The union's sham fight against district waste and mismanagement, moreover, has now culminated in the destruction of job security and benefits for which previous generations of teachers had fought. The fact that private charter operators have been excluded, at least for the next three years that the agreement is in effect, from taking over district schools simply means that the United Teachers of Los Angeles has been deemed a more consistent and reliable partner in implementing austerity.

It is no coincidence that the so-called education reform movement—of which the “School District Education and Empowerment Initiative” is simply the last incarnation—has been launched during the worst economic crisis since the 1930s.

The financial elite consider spending on children's education to be an unacceptable drain on the fantastic profits to which they feel entitled. This was spelled out by Governor Brown after ending school busing in the state and announcing billions more to cuts in public education once the 2012-2013 budget is enacted. Said Brown, “When they asked Willie Sutton why he robbed banks, he said ‘because that's where the money is’. Well, education is where California's money is.”



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