

# The political issues facing Los Angeles teachers

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Negotiations for a new three-year labor agreement are underway between the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) and the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). The contract will cover wages, benefits and working conditions for 31,000 teachers in the nation's second largest school district, which serves 640,000 students.

Talks are taking place under conditions of a nationwide attack on teachers and public education led by the Obama administration. Since 2009, hundreds of thousands of teachers have lost their jobs, thousands of schools have closed and standardized tests have been expanded to victimize teachers and accelerate the spread of for-profit charter schools.

This would not have been possible without the active participation of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA), which have suppressed opposition by teachers, parents and students to the White House's reactionary school "reform" agenda.

In California, per pupil spending for K-12 education has fallen by 13.8 percent since 2008. Budget cuts and layoffs in Los Angeles have produced overcrowded classrooms and shortages, with half of the district's 600 elementary and middle school libraries left unstaffed.

Earlier this summer, the Democratic-controlled state assembly passed Bill 215 scaling back due process rights for teachers and a Los Angeles Superior Court judge declared teacher tenure unconstitutional in *Vergara vs. California*. This ruling, which was hailed by Obama's education secretary Arne Duncan, will set the stage for the purging of thousands of higher seniority teachers in the state and their replacement with low-paid and inexperienced instructors.

Allied with the Democratic Party and thoroughly committed to its program of austerity, the UTLA has joined the effort to dismantle long-standing teacher rights. In fact, the UTLA operates dozens of charter schools where it oversees teacher "accountability," i.e., the disciplining and firing of teachers who essentially have no rights.

In the current negotiations, which will resume on August

21, the UTLA is deliberately concealing these political issues confronting teachers. Instead, in an effort to placate the anger of teachers—who have suffered a sharp decline in living standards due to years of stagnant wages—the UTLA is demanding a one-time salary increase of 17.6 percent. The school district has countered with a proposal of a two percent raise in each of the first two years and 2.5 percent in the third year of the contract.

During the course of negotiations, the union has peddled the false claim that the district's budget alone is sufficient to accommodate these wage demands. In fact, the district has been starved of funds by a combination of state and federal budget cuts, and decades of tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy. The state is home to 111 billionaires, the largest number in the US.

As part of Democratic Governor Jerry Brown's 2014-15 state budget, local school districts like LAUSD are being forced to shore up funds to the CalSTRS teacher pension fund by more than doubling existing contributions from 8.25 percent of payroll to 19.1 percent. The district's financial office has already projected it will not have the roughly \$63.5 million to pay for proposed wage increases to other unionized school employees. Counting on the unions to provoke a fratricidal struggle between school workers over supposedly scarce resources, LAUSD Superintendent John Deasy recently declared, "We still have a lot of belt-tightening down the road to do so we can honor these agreements."

Although UTLA officials have pledged to strike if this demand is not met, newly elected union head Alex Caputo-Pearl has made it clear the UTLA, even if it were forced to call a strike, would do nothing to mount any challenge to the bipartisan assault on public education. Caputo-Pearl, like his predecessors, is thoroughly committed to the Democratic Party—and its program of austerity at home and war abroad.

The city's new mayor, Eric Garcetti, was an invited guest to the recent American Federation of Teachers convention in Los Angeles. Garcetti who previously hailed the Vergara ruling as a "great decision," repeated the lie that seniority

rights have “unfairly impacted poor communities.” He nevertheless gave a nod to the AFT executives, saying, “we don’t have to demolish the importance of tenure” and “we can find a collaborative way” to “reform in a positive way.” Caputo-Pearl praised the mayor’s reactionary comments, saying, “We’re glad that he indicated that he supports tenure and elements of seniority. We have to keep on having those discussions with him.”

The new leadership of the UTLA is seeking to refurbish the image of the union and block the development of an independent struggle by teachers. Following similar campaigns in Chicago, New York and other cities, the UTLA has adopted a PR campaign called the “Schools LA Students Deserve.” Authored by members of the International Socialist Organization (ISO) and other pseudo-left groups who have been integrated into the AFT apparatus, the document employs the language of identity politics—blaming school closings and budget cuts on “racism” and calling for “local control.” This is a means of diverting working class anger behind policies that are completely compatible with the Democratic Party-led education “reform” efforts.

As part of his 2013-2014 state fiscal year budget California Governor Jerry Brown has included a program known as the Local Control Funding Formula, (LCFF), which behind the claim of addressing disparities in funding and outcomes among minority communities, frees districts from state constraints relating to the hiring and firing of teachers. It will also give districts greater “independence” to implement Obama’s Common Core program by facilitating the termination of full time teachers in favor of independent consultants and instructional aides who will be paid far less than their full time counterparts.

The UTLA leadership is seeking to emulate the ISO-led Caucus of Rank and File Educators in the Chicago Teachers Union and its so-called policy of “Social Justice Unionism.” Describing this amorphous conception, Michelle Gunderson, the co-founder of the National Movement for Social Justice Unionism, wrote, “What that means, in my mind, is that we hold workers’ rights in the same plane and in the same balance as students’ rights and community rights. We don’t hold our needs above students.”

Suggesting that the AFT and the NEA have been waging a pitiless battle to defend the living standards, working conditions and tenure rights of teachers—while sadly ignoring broader issues—is laughable. In reality, the teachers unions have sacrificed *both* the rights of teachers and the interests of students, parents and the communities they live in.

“Social Justice Unionism” is nothing but a rehash of the policies that have led teachers and all defenders of public education to a political dead end. This was proven by the

betrayal of the 2012 Chicago teachers strike by CTU President Karen Lewis and vice president—and ISO leader--Jesse Sharkey.

The CTU shut down the struggle before it could develop into a political confrontation with Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel and the Obama administration. Having already signed a deal with Democratic state legislators to keep school closings off of the bargaining table, these advocates of “social justice unionism” accepted an agreement that allowed Emanuel to close 50 schools and lay off thousands of teachers.

The defense and vast improvement of public education is not possible without attacking the present concentration of wealth and immense levels of social inequality produced by capitalism. Neither the UTLA nor any other union is willing or capable of carrying out such a fight because, in the final analysis, the high paid salaries and privileges of the union executives are based on the defense of this oppressive system.

The starting point of any serious struggle is for teachers to shake off the domination of the UTLA and its “left” apologists and develop new forms of struggle—independent of the unions and both big business parties--to unite teachers, students and parents in struggle to defend public education. The fight to change the priorities of society and guarantee the needs of the great majority, including the right to high quality public education, requires a political struggle by the working class based on a socialist program. We urge Los Angeles teachers to contract the Socialist Equality Party to take forward this fight.



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