

Los Angeles teachers face political fight to defend public education

Dan Conway
4 May 2015

More than 35,000 teachers are currently voting on the agreement reached between the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) and the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the second-largest public school system in the United States with 670,000 students.

The deal is a stab in the back to the district's teachers and other school employees, which opens the door for an escalation of the attacks on the jobs, wages and conditions of educators in Los Angeles and around the country. The sellout further integrates the UTLA into the billionaire-led education "reform" movement and the anti-teacher attacks being spearheaded by the Obama administration and the Democrats and Republicans at every level of government.

The agreement is a veritable compendium of anti-teacher provisions that should be decisively rejected. These include:

- The implementation of teacher evaluation schemes designed to accelerate the mass firings of well-qualified teachers. Far from ending punitive test-based "accountability" schemes, the contract establishes a new evaluation program in which the UTLA will have joint authority with the district to implement new teacher evaluation measures.
- An agreement to end the so-called "teacher jail" system. Instead, teachers accused of alleged misconduct will have their cases reviewed in 90 days or less to accelerate the victimization and dismissal of teachers.
- An insulting 10.6 percent pay increase, which the union agreed to after dropping its initial 17 percent proposal. The raise will not make up for unpaid furlough days and other sacrifices forced on teachers since the 2008 financial crash, nor the additional out-of-pocket health care expenses absorbed by UTLA members.
- Guidelines related to class size restrictions that will do nothing to actually reduce class sizes or hire more teachers. Only \$13 million—out of a budget of \$7.2

billion—will be allocated to reduce class sizes. The union itself acknowledges class size reductions "may not be achieved due to circumstances such as state funding limitations."

The *World Socialist Web Site* calls on teachers and school employees to reject this sellout deal with the contempt it deserves and form rank-and-file committees to prepare a citywide strike. At the same time teachers must reach out to the broadest sections of the working class—parents, students, city workers, dockworkers, immigrant workers and others—to support the fight to defend public education.

Above all teachers must understand that this is a political fight. Every section of the political establishment—from President Obama to Governor Brown to Mayor Eric Garcetti, the Democrats and the Republicans—are determined to destroy public education and further open up the \$1.3 trillion "education market" to for-profit companies and hedge funds.

Teachers and the achievements won through decades of struggle have become such a target that university enrollment in teacher and education programs is experiencing record declines. In the state of California, teacher enrollment programs fell 53 percent between 2008 and 2012 while overall student enrollment in the university system actually increased.

While the financial elite claims that there is no money for smaller class sizes or decent pay for teachers, trillions are squandered on Wall Street bailouts, corporate tax cuts and the funding of current wars and the new ones being planned. As poverty increases and social programs are cut, 95 percent of all income gains have gone to the top one percent since the economic "recovery" began.

According to a 2014 study, the city of Los Angeles is the ninth most unequal major city in the country, with the top 5 percent of income earners earning as much as 12.3 times the lowest 20 percent of income earners. This

actually understates the real level of inequality since it does not factor in capital gains and investment income.

Meanwhile more than 50 percent of Los Angeles children between one month and 17 years live in poverty. More than 1.3 million county residents are classified as food insecure.

To claim that teachers can overcome these wretched conditions without a vast infusion of resources to eradicate poverty and chronically underfunded schools is a lie. Instead the politicians from both parties scapegoat teachers for these problems in order to accelerate the destruction of public education.

In the eyes of the corporate and financial elite, an educated working class is dangerous. That is why the expansion of poverty wage jobs, cuts in essential services, an epidemic of police killings and threat of wider wars have gone hand in hand with the shutdown of schools and the layoff of hundreds of thousands of teachers since 2008.

The UTLA, like its counterparts across the country, seeks to conceal these political issues and prevent a mobilization of teachers and other workers against the Democratic Party, with which the unions are allied. At the same time the union promotes the absurd claim that the lack of funding is solely due to local district mismanagement.

In reality, successive state administrations, including Democratic Governor Jerry Brown's, have cut billions from public education to provide more tax cuts to the corporations and the wealthy. To the extent that education funding has been restored under the "balanced" state budget of 2014, it has largely been funneled into the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), which pumps billions of dollars into private charter schools.

The UTLA has not raised any complaints about the LCFF and is also largely silent on the question of the governor's soon-to-be-released May Budgetary Review, which could reduce traditional public school funding even further.

The UTLA and its parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers, do not defend the interests of teachers, parents or students. On the contrary, the UTLA and AFT collaborate with the enemies of public education, including Bill Gates, President Obama and Arne Duncan, and are only looking to get their own share from the transformation of education into a profit-making business.

The UTLA already runs its own charter-style operations, so-called "Pilot Schools," which give the

union authority to hire and fire teachers while receiving state funding with little or no oversight. It is noteworthy that the UTLA made no protest over the recent reimposition of the reactionary Parent Trigger Law, which was first used to push for the conversion of 22nd Street Elementary into a Pilot School.

With 100,000, or 15 percent of the district's students, already in charters, the UTLA is seeking to expand its franchise into Alliance Charter Schools, the largest such operation. This will mean that charter teachers—who will continue to earn miserable wages and lack basic job security—will now pay for the privilege of being a "union" member.

No struggle against the continued attacks on teachers and privatization of public education can be carried without a complete break with the UTLA, the AFT and the NEA. School employees should elect rank-and-file committees to defeat this sellout and unite with the widest sections of the working class to defend public education.

Above all, a political movement is needed to unite all workers, black, white, immigrant, employed and unemployed, in a common fight against the economic and political dictatorship of the super-rich. Such a movement can only develop in opposition to the both parties of big business, the Democrats and Republicans, the trade unions and the profit system they defend.

The defense and immense improvement of public education require a fundamental redistribution of society's resources—the wealth created by the collective labor of working people. This can only happen if the working class takes political power and implements a socialist program to eradicate poverty and vastly raise the material and cultural conditions of the masses of workers and youth.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact