

Los Angeles area teachers stage “sickouts” over pay

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Teachers in the Compton Unified School District (CUSD), south of Los Angeles, stayed out of their classrooms twice last week as part of organized “sickouts” designed to protest low wages and bad working conditions.

On Monday, more than 200 CUSD teachers called out sick, including 44 at Compton High School alone, or nearly 50 percent of faculty currently working at that school. On Friday, ten of the district’s 37 schools were forced to close Friday because of a shortage of teachers.

There is no indication that the Compton Education Association (CEA) called the protests, and there is nothing on the union’s web site about them. It is likely rank-and-file teachers organized the sickouts independently of the union just like educators in Detroit did earlier this year. The district’s 1,200 teachers and other school employees are frustrated over stalled contract talks and angered that the CEA has kept them on the job without a contract since the last one expired in June 2015.

In an effort to regain control of the situation union officials called a rally at district headquarters Tuesday where they tried to identify themselves with the teachers’ grievances. “You need to put money into the classroom, where the students are and that should be the priority,” teachers union President Patrick Sullivan said at the rally.

The central issues in the current negotiations are over salary and medical benefits. The Compton Unified School District is offering teachers an insulting 2 percent salary increase, well below the 3.1 percent increase in the Consumer Price Index, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The CEA has limited its wage demands to 5 percent.

Friday’s action was the fourth sickout organized by Compton teachers in the last three years alone. Last

November, more than half of Compton high school teachers called in sick to protest recent school board elections and the passage of local Bond Measure S, meant to modernize schools at the expense of teacher compensation. At the time, teachers also argued that the school board was rife with graft and corruption and that a significant portion of that funding would thus not be used to improve any schools in the district.

On March 11, 2014, teachers in Compton organized a sickout to protest the collapse of contract talks between the district and the union, with the CEA vehemently denying claims they were behind the job action. At the time CEA President Sullivan said, “The Compton Education Association did not sanction a sickout nor a strike. It hasn’t been planned.”

In an open letter to teachers on February 3 in anticipation of possible sickout actions, Compton Schools Superintendent Darin Brawley claimed the district’s offer was overly generous, as Compton teachers did not suffer unpaid furloughs and layoffs like many other districts across the state after the 2008 recession.

Teachers in Compton Unified, however, were already some of the most poorly paid in the entire greater Los Angeles area, and this was true even after unpaid furloughs were implemented in nearby districts. The last time Compton teachers received a raise was in 2014 after they had gone without a salary increase of any kind for seven whole years.

While teachers throughout the Los Angeles area work extremely long hours, their take-home pay is often not enough to pay for the most basic expenses. According to California Housing Partnership, in order to afford an apartment at a level that is no more than 30 percent of take home wages, a Los Angeles resident should make a minimum of \$68,640 per year, well above the average

salary of Los Angeles area teachers, including Compton.

Like teachers around the country, many Compton teachers are compelled to spend their own funds on school supplies, as the district itself will not pay for them. In some schools, teachers bring their own hand soap to school bathrooms because automatic soap dispensers are never refilled.

This sickout follows other independent maneuvers of teachers across the country, including teacher sickouts in Detroit, Michigan last month to protest deplorable and unsanitary conditions within the school district. A few weeks later, 2,000 teachers marched in downtown Chicago after rank-and-file teachers rebelled against an effort by the Chicago Teachers Union to push through a deal that would slash jobs, wages and pension benefits.

The California affiliates of the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers are aligned with Governor Jerry Brown, who, along with President Obama and the Democratic Party on the national level, is spearheading the attack on teachers and public education as a whole. Last April, the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) accepted a deal with the Los Angeles Unified School District that continued the erosion of living standards for the district's 35,000 public school teachers, while blocking any struggle against overcrowded classrooms, the lack of supplies and the bipartisan attack on public education.

Confronting teachers around the country is a united front that aims to turn the \$500 billion a year US public education system into a source of naked profiteering. This front consists of not only the Gates and Broad foundation and other billionaire "philanthropists," but also the Democratic and Republican parties and the trade unions.

Compton teachers should expand their struggle by organizing rank-and-file committees in every school, democratically controlled by teachers and independent of the CEA, to fight for the broadest mobilization of students, parents and the entire working class in defense of their jobs and living standards and public education as a whole.



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