

Nearly 30,000 Los Angeles School District support staff to vote for strike authorization

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Nearly 30,000 school workers are set to vote on strike authorization this month in the Los Angeles Unified School District, the nation's second largest.

Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 99 announced the vote last week after the school district proposed a paltry 2 percent raise for the 2017-2018 academic year with an option to reopen salary negotiations should the district's financial health improve.

LA Unified's chief negotiator, Najeeb Khoury, said the district's latest offer was "solid" and that it was the best it could do given rising pension costs and declining enrollment due to the proliferation of private charter schools.

The fact that charter schools are a significant contributor to the district's deficit indicates the financial elites' motivation for funding and advocating for charter schools in the first place. That is, the schools were meant to serve as a mechanism not to improve children's educational outcomes, but to attack public education and promote privatization schemes. The promotion of charter schools was a major component of the education policy of the Obama administration, backed by the teachers' unions.

"We encourage SEIU Local 99 to continue working with us at the table to find solutions that take into account our economic reality," Khoury said. "We trust that SEIU Local 99 will follow the law and will not declare a strike before going through all the statutory mandated procedures, including mediation and fact-finding."

In other words, the district is expecting underpaid and overworked school employees to accept all the time-honored tricks, including government-appointed mediators whose role it is to side against the workers.

In calling the strike authorization vote, the SEIU is

responding to deep anger among school bus drivers, teachers' aides, clerical workers, custodians and other classified employees. Its aim is to tamp down this opposition, direct it behind the Democratic Party and prevent their struggle from uniting with the growing mood of anger and unrest among school employees throughout the country.

Should strike authorization pass in a vote between March 12 through 24, this will be followed by ongoing negotiations with the school district.

The other major school worker union, the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA), is also in the midst of contract negotiations with the district via a series of contract openers scheduled over a period of several months. The UTLA has said that its members have a right to "engage in sympathy and solidarity activities" with SEIU workers should they go on strike.

However, the UTLA and the SEIU deliberately complete their negotiations separately so that no chance exists of united actions by both sections of school workers.

The suppression of workers' resistance by the Los Angeles unions is seen as particularly critical now in the aftermath of the nine-day strike of West Virginia Teachers along with strike preparations by Oklahoma teachers this week. With the Janus vs. AFSCME case on the constitutionality of "agency fees" pending before the Supreme Court, unions throughout the US are eager to demonstrate their role in suppressing the class struggle, as expressed by a union lawyer in oral arguments last month: "Union security is the tradeoff for no strikes."

LAUSD workers should reject the claim that there is no money for decent wages and benefits, or that wage increases and improved health care benefits must be paid for through cuts to pension benefits and decreased

funding for class offerings.

There is more than enough money to provide children with high quality affordable education while providing teachers and support staff with a decent standard of living. Just last year, the number of billionaires in Los Angeles County alone increased from 50 to 58. These individuals had a combined net worth of \$203 billion at the end of 2017.

By comparison, LAUSD's projected deficit for the 2018-2019 academic year amounts to only \$1.6 billion, using the highest estimate provided by the district. In other words, the district's financial woes, which will be used as pretext to deny decent wages and benefits to school employees, amount to, at best, a little more than half of a percent of the wealth of these 58 individuals alone.

The fight by school workers and teachers in Los Angeles, as with workers throughout the US, is a political struggle that places them in direct conflict with both the Republican and Democratic parties. The unions in LA have promoted illusions that the Democrats will fund public education, but school systems throughout the state have been underfunded under the leadership of Governor Jerry Brown.

With the support of the unions, Brown has overseen the vast expansion of charter schools in the state, which now has the largest number of charter school students in the country.



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