

Los Angeles teachers vote on strike authorization

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Over 26,000 teachers in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) began a strike vote yesterday. It is expected to be passed by wide margins. Were there to be a strike, it would be the first since 1989, nearly 30 years ago. The United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) is the second largest teachers union in the country and serves over 640,000 students.

The UTLA has kept Los Angeles teachers working without a contract for 13 months, deliberately isolating them from the teacher walkouts in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona, Kentucky and Colorado during the spring. During that time, many teachers across the US were demanding a national strike, yet the UTLA forced teachers to stay in the classroom.

Los Angeles teachers have demanded the union finally take action, pointing to overflowing classes, lack of school nurses or counselors and low wages. They have also opposed the drive for school privatization, noting California already has more privately run charter schools than any other state. Union membership in the LAUSD has dropped from 42,000 to 31,000 since 2007, reflecting school closures, reduced services and growing class sizes.

Now, after more than 17 months of negotiations, the union has declared an impasse, which was made official by the California Public Employees Relations Board on August 3. The strike authorization vote is taking place between August 23 and 30, with a mandatory court-appointed mediation meeting scheduled for September 27. This means that should the strike vote pass, Los Angeles teachers would still not potentially strike before October at the earliest, pending the outcome of mediation.

There can be no doubt that negotiations were deliberately stalled by the UTLA to minimize the chances that a potential strike would occur in the lead-

up to the mid-term elections and cut across support for local and national Democratic Party candidates. In fact, at a downtown rally ostensibly held to build support for teachers last May the union spent more time praising Democrats running for office than they did professing concern for teachers' livelihoods. UTLA President Alex Caputo-Pearl announced that the "most important thing we can do right now is work to elect [California gubernatorial front runner] Gavin Newsom."

The UTLA has proposed a pay increase of 6.5 percent retroactive to July 1, 2016, an amount which does little to address the skyrocketing cost of living in the expensive state of California. For its part, the district has proposed an insulting 2 percent ongoing salary increase along with a one-time 2 percent bonus, supposedly sweetened with a mere \$500 stipend to assist teachers in the purchase of school supplies. School superintendent Austin Beutner is a former partner of the Blackstone Group, a private equity firm, and a former CEO of the *Los Angeles Times*.

Beutner recently claimed that the district's costs would balloon by more than \$1 billion annually if the union's stated demands were met. While the district is advancing the false claim that there is "no money" for public education and teacher pay, the union claims that their demands can be met entirely with district funds while calling for votes for Democratic politicians such as gubernatorial hopeful Gavin Newsom who would act just as ruthlessly as his Republican opponent in the attack on teachers. A large portion of cuts to education have in fact taken place under the current Democratic Governor, Jerry Brown, in office since 2011.

The UTLA has also made largely unspecified demands for class size reductions, changes to the teacher-evaluation system, along with more school nurses, librarians and "restorative-justice" advisers.

The union's demands also include more ethnic studies and multicultural literature classes, teacher discretion over standardized testing, along with union input in the provisioning of private charter school classes within traditional public school campuses.

Fearing the implications of the recent US Supreme Court *Janus vs. AFSCME* decision on its union dues base, the UTLA is also demanding that the district pay for any new hires to attend a membership sales pitch of no less than 60 minutes during which time district officials cannot be present. The UTLA has been decimated by the growth of charter schools in Los Angeles, and, far from opposing them, the union is merely doubling down on organizing them and collecting dues money.

The UTLA, in fact, accepts the destruction of public education in Los Angeles as an all-but-accomplished fact. The union itself operates a network of charter schools in the district known as "pilot schools." These schools operate as private charter schools run by the UTLA, receiving unaccountable funding from the state. The pilot schools operate under an Elect-to-Work agreement requiring teachers to essentially reapply for their jobs each year, effectively eliminating tenure regardless of how long a teacher is employed.

The actual language in the union's "last-best and final offer" to the district makes clear that the union's stated demands are only so much bombast that they have no intention of implementing in practice even were a teachers' strike to actually take place.

For example, the proposed contract language for class sizes only indicates that, "Class size shall not exceed the room occupancy/seating requirements of applicable fire codes." It also indicates that for Learning Centers and Reading Labs, "when attendance reaches 23 or more students for three consecutive days an additional person (e.g., aide or teaching assistant) shall be provided to assist the instructor." In other words, the "fight for smaller class sizes" being conducted by the UTLA does not include the new hiring of a single full-time teacher and only insures less overcrowded classrooms when the district can afford it.

As far as the call for less standardized testing is concerned, the UTLA's offer mandates that teachers still abide by all state and federal standardized testing requirements and that any additional testing be conducted at the teachers' discretion.

Los Angeles teachers should make every effort to vote in favor of a strike. However, they must also be fully aware that the unions will do everything in their power to prevent or to limit strike action. This makes all the more urgent the necessity for the creation of genuine rank-and-file committees of teachers, school support workers and students, to take the struggle out of the hands of the UTLA and the teachers unions in general which largely act as corporate-management syndicates.



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