

Los Angeles teachers vote 98 percent for strike authorization

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After six days of balloting, Los Angeles teachers voted by a resounding 98 percent for strike authorization, expressing their anger and determination to fight for better wages and the defense of public education. Los Angeles Unified School District is the second largest school district in the country, with 640,000 students and over 33,000 teachers.

The vote follows a similar strike authorization by Seattle teachers and coincides with a series of teacher strikes in the state of Washington. Many teachers were very aware that Washington state teachers were spreading their strikes, demanding substantial pay increases, as educators seek to continue the “teacher spring” into the fall. Earlier this year statewide walkouts by educators swept through West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona, Colorado, North Carolina, Kentucky and other states.

This strike authorization vote is the first in the district since the nine-day strike in 1989. Following the financial crash, thousands of Los Angeles teachers called in sick in 2009 after hearing about possible layoffs. Tens of thousands of teachers were laid off nationwide during the two terms of the Obama administration.

The issues facing Los Angeles teachers are the same for educators across the country: large class sizes, stagnant pay, lack of support staff or services for special education. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the average LA teacher makes just 60 percent of what similarly educated professionals are paid.

Relatively speaking, California teachers are paid more than in other states, but the cost of living is much higher. Due to stagnant pay and higher health care costs, the state suffered a net loss of 18,000 elementary and secondary teachers between 2003–2016,

exacerbating already overcrowded classrooms and deteriorating conditions.

By demanding more full-time counselors, school psychologists, nurses and librarians, teachers are seeking to address both the decline in educational conditions and the trauma of their students caused by inequality, poverty and official neglect. In the short time since the school year resumed, three Rancho Cucamonga high school students and an elementary student have committed suicide. Shockingly, suicide is now the second-leading cause of death among Americans 10–14 years old and 15–24 years old.

Since the 2008 financial crisis, state, federal and local governments have sought to balance their budgets through savage cuts to public education and other vital social programs even as politicians from both big-business parties handed over untold billions in tax cuts to corporations like Boeing and Amazon.

The teachers’ union, United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA), and the LAUSD Superintendent Austin Beutner, a former investment banker and head of the *Los Angeles Times*, have been exchanging charges of Unfair Labor Practices and not bargaining in good faith.

While the teachers are determined to fight, the UTLA is working to block a strike by tying up teachers in endless mediation and maneuvers with Democratic Party officials, including Mayor Eric Garcetti.

At the press conference Friday night announcing the vote totals, UTLA chair of the bargaining team Arlene Inouye assured the political and corporate establishment that a strike authorization vote does not mean the union will call a strike. “It gives us [the union] the power to call for a strike if necessary,” she stressed. “We are demanding Beutner send his team straight to mediation! The process we have to follow is

mediation, fact finding, and then the district could make an offer.”

The WSWWS spoke with several Los Angeles teachers about the vote. Ricky Presley, a special education assistant at Wilmington Middle School Magnet, said, “I love my job because I love these kids. I’ve been working here since 2007. I’m 61 years old and the only male among the assistants. Many of these kids are lonely. They have no father figure at home because they come from broken families.

“The superintendent says we have to increase the ratio of special ed students to teachers. He says we have too many assistants and teachers. No! These kids have a lot of needs. In special ed, we need many teachers and assistants.

“We also need to be compensated properly. We should get paid a salary. When a substitute comes in, we do what the teacher does. We run the class and know how to work with the kids because we’re trained.”

Jose Sanchez, with 20 years’ seniority, teaches math at Wilmington Middle School Magnet. “Basically, there are too many students in the classrooms. It’s supposed to be 24–27 kids, but there are 34–35.

“We don’t get paid enough. Several years ago, you could go anywhere and get a good breakfast for \$6, now it’s \$11. A decent dinner used to be about \$12, now you have to pay \$19 or so.

“I cannot afford to buy a home. Our salaries really haven’t kept up with the rising cost of living. Teachers are leaving the profession and the state, including several friends. We’re looking for something else.”

Joe Mendoza teaches history at Banning High in Wilmington. “I said ‘yes’ to the strike authorization. We definitely need smaller class sizes. Some of my classes have 47 kids, and there are other teachers with more than that. Our pay is not keeping up with cost of living. Also, if I compare my salary to those of my friends who are also college-educated professionals, we are way underpaid.

“I’d consider myself a socialist. I teach history, and if you study European history, you can understand why people went that way.”

Carmen Cazares also teaches at Banning High School. “This is my seventh year here, and I teach chemistry. Class sizes are too large. My smallest class has 36 students. Last year I had 44, 42. When you’re

trying to do labs, you have to make larger groups of students, so they can share the materials, equipment and space. There’s not enough for each student to have his own. I try to give constructive feedback to the students, but there’s just too many of them. There’s no time, and I always have loads of work to do.

“My husband and I are very lucky. We were able to buy our first home because both of us are working. I know it’s very hard for most people. My husband works for the gas company, and they just got a 9 percent raise over three years. We have three kids—three, two and a one-year-old. The district is trying to cut our medical. And it’s my medical plan that’s covering the family.”

Far from opposing the attacks on teachers and public education, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), National Education Association (NEA) and its state and local affiliates have colluded with the corporate-backed “school reform” agenda promoted by both the Democrats and Republicans. Any deal the UTLA reaches with a mediator will be a betrayal of teachers and wholly acceptable to corporate and financial interests that run the city.

The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site Teacher Newsletter* call for teachers, school workers, parents and students to form rank-and-file committees in every school and community to mobilize the widest support for strike action. These committees should outline their own demands, including a 30 percent across-the-board pay increase and full funding for the health care and pension benefits of all school workers, an immediate reduction in class sizes and the restoration of all budget cuts.

Los Angeles teachers should spearhead the fight to unify educators throughout the country and every other section of the working class—UPS, Amazon, auto and steel workers, young people—in preparation for a general strike to defend the social rights of the working class, including the right to livable wages and high-quality public education.



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