

Los Angeles teachers union continues to delay strike action as negotiations proceed

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More than one month after Los Angeles teachers voted in favor of strike action the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) union is dragging out negotiations with the district.

Teachers are watching this latest contract battle with great interest across the country. A walkout by Los Angeles teachers would become a significant focal point of resistance in the midst of a series of ongoing strikes and protests by teachers and school employees across the country. Moreover, it would represent a major counterattack against the billionaire-led school privatization movement, especially given that Los Angeles has the most charter schools of any district in the country.

The UTLA, however, is doing everything in its power, including utilizing the deliberately constrictive nature of public employee bargaining laws, to either stop such a strike from occurring or at least to delay it as long as possible. This only ensures that any strike will be conducted entirely on the management's terms and will be kept isolated and contained.

On September 1, more than 83 percent of the 33,000 teachers working in the Los Angeles Unified School District participated in the UTLA's strike authorization vote, handing down a 98 percent strike mandate. The vote came after the union had already been in negotiation with the district for more than 17 months. The teachers themselves had, at that time, been working without a contract for more than 13 months. Although the strike authorization vote passed, an actual strike would occur entirely at the discretion of the UTLA itself rather than rank-and-file teachers.

The strike authorization vote had been preceded by the appointment of a state mediator from the California Public Employment Relations Board on August 9. Under the terms of California Labor Statutes, a state mediator can be designated after the declaration of an impasse between the union and the district. The first mediation session, however, did not take place until September 30. A second mediation session took place October 3.

At the time the impasse was declared the UTLA's proposal to the district included a 6.5 percent wage increase retroactive to 2016 while the district's offer at the time was a two percent increase each year for the three years of the contract. Both proposed increases were abysmally low and would do nothing

to alleviate the social hardships faced by Los Angeles teachers.

Average monthly rent in Los Angeles is now \$2,784 or more than 60 percent of an average teacher's pre-tax income. This April, *Forbes* magazine rated Los Angeles the worst city in the country for renters, topping San Francisco for the first time.

Most teachers cannot afford to live on their existing salaries and often resort to second and even third jobs to make ends meet. An August article in the *Atlantic* magazine found that more than 10 percent of all Airbnb hosts nationwide were K through 12 teachers. This compares to less than two percent of the overall working age population. The investigation further found that those teachers made an average of \$6,500 annually through the service.

A Los Angeles teacher spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about his experiences in the classroom.

"I find it difficult teaching because we are not given enough resources," he said. "We are allocated one box of printer paper for a five-month period. This is hardly enough paper to teach a foreign language because learning a language requires a lot of written practice. In a five-month period I go through at least two and a half boxes of paper.

"Furthermore, we have a nurse once a week. When the student is sick and the nurse is not there the student needs to stick it out and deal with it.

"I feel that my colleagues and I work very hard with our students' education. Honestly, we do not make enough money to keep up with inflation. Many teachers need to work a second job to survive. For example, I am coaching two sports this year to make ends meet. I also was looking into grocery stores, but I haven't had any luck on getting an interview because most grocery stores are looking for teenagers they can pay a lower rate."

Immediately prior to the start of the first mediation session last Friday, LAUSD superintendent Austin Beutner released terms of a new contract proposal to the *Los Angeles Times*, which included a six percent wage increase comprised of a three percent increase in the first year of the contract followed by a three percent wage increase in the second year contingent upon the district's financial health. Beutner's proposal also called for class size reductions at 15 middle school and 75 elementary schools, only about ten percent of the schools in

LAUSD.

Beutner wrote, “Today’s offer to L.A. Unified’s teachers shows our commitment to helping students most in need. Our offer creates a pathway for L.A. Unified and UTLA to avoid a strike that would hurt L.A.’s most vulnerable students and families.” In fact, Los Angeles teachers have enormous support in the working class. A poll conducted by *USA Today* and Ipsos Public Affairs found that even parents affected by the ongoing series of teacher strikes throughout the country overwhelmingly support them.

The UTLA called Beutner’s proposals insulting, in contrast to their own entirely inadequate demands, and criticized the superintendent for contacting the *Times* to release the proposals rather than speaking with the union first. On Wednesday, October 3 the UTLA responded to the provocation in a press conference, announcing the release of Buetner’s professional calendar from May to September of this year listing regular contacts with prominent school privatization advocates.

At this point, the union has met with the district twice in mediation and has not been able to reach an agreement. A third mediation session is now scheduled for October 12.

Under California law, if a state-appointed mediator is unable to effect settlement within 15 days after appointment, a fact-finding panel may be designated, which would not begin its work until a maximum of five days after that. At that point, the fact-finding panel would have up to ten days to meet with representatives of the district and the union. In other words, the “fact-finding” process could take up to 30 days before a strike actually takes place.

The fact that a fact-finding panel has not even been set up only indicates that the union is doing everything in its power to prevent a strike of Los Angeles teachers in the next few months. The aim of the strike delay is to prevent possible embarrassment for Democrats in advance of the November 8 mid-term election. The UTLA is heavily backing establishment Democrats, including Gavin Newsom for governor.

At a May rally sponsored by the UTLA, union president Alex Caputo-Pearl told the 12,000 assembled teachers that “the most important thing we can do right now is make sure that Gavin Newsom becomes the next governor of California.”

This despite the record of the Democratic administration of California Governor Jerry Brown, which has carried out ruthless cuts to education since taking office.

In a provocative move designed to intimidate teachers, a recent strike handbook posted by UTLA on its web site states that teachers would have to shoulder the financial burdens of any strike. In the latest strike handbook issued by the UTLA, a part of the Q&A section notes that teachers will not get strike pay, instead they will be eligible after 10 days for “modest low interest loans guaranteed by the UTLA strike fund.”

Similarly, should a strike last longer than one month, the handbook specifies that teachers would then be responsible for covering the cost of their own health insurance.

The last time Los Angeles teachers went on strike was in 1989. At an average of \$1,000 in union dues per year, per educator, teachers have every right to ask what on earth they’ve been paying the union for over the past nearly 30 years. The union is telling teachers that they won’t receive a single dime from the union’s “strike fund” should they strike.

The only way forward for Los Angeles teachers is to conduct the struggle on their own terms, against the unions and Democratic Party. This involves the creation of rank and file committees in conjunction with teachers across California and nationwide.

Teachers must insist that all meetings taking place between the union, the district and with state-appointed mediators be live-streamed over the internet. Teachers must demand an increase of at least 30 percent to assure a decent standard of living in the city of Los Angeles. They must demand that schools provide adequate supplies for all students including up-to-date textbooks, paper supplies, writing implements and all necessary electronic instructional aids. Class sizes must be reduced to a maximum of 20 students per classroom and this in turn must be based on the hiring of commensurate amount of qualified public school teachers. Moreover, a complete moratorium on the creation of new charter schools must be made effective immediately.

Above all else, teachers in Los Angeles must link their struggles with teachers throughout the state and throughout the country. Online meetings to coordinate struggles must be organized through social media and must be targeted at the state itself, which falsely claims there is no money for basic education while a tiny handful of oligarchs continues to hoard hundreds of billions in private wealth.

We urge teachers to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* to help take this struggle forward today.



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